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Science Fiction QUARTERLY

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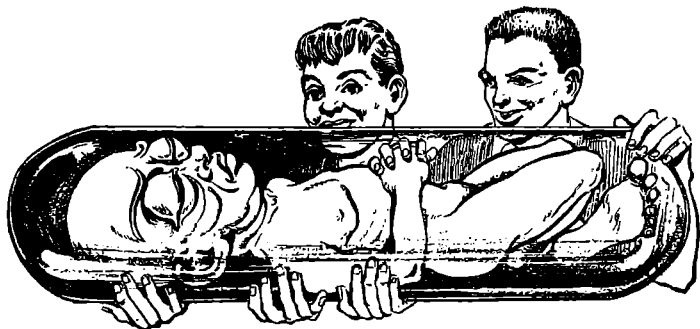
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NO MORE PENCILS, NO MORE BOOKS

by Joquel Kennedy

● Pug Stevens wasn't interested in digging up old Martian relics -- but when he dug up an old Martian itself . . . ! ●

THE CITY was, oh, such a wonderful place! It must have been designed for hide and seek. You could duck into a little crumbling doorway where the shadows had gathered for centuries; you could crouch down, holding your breath, and whoever was it would run by. Pipes like hollow tree-trunks tunnelled under the street: there wasn't any water in them now. Lying inside, you could hear footsteps go thudding right over your head—

But Miss Wipple put a stop to the game. "Gertrude! Otto! Gregory! You come right here this minute! One of those towers might fall on you and we'd never even find your body—*Laura!* Spit out that gum. Now stay close beside me, all of you—we're only on Mars for today, remember, so let's spend every moment learning things."

Miss Wipple was explaining the commonly accepted theory that the Martians had all been killed by a terrible plague, but ten-year-old Pug

Stevens didn't hear very much of Miss Wipple's explanation. He was busy listening to the winds that sang like melancholy ghosts between the towers, busy trying to decide whether the winds were saying words.

Time had eaten away the towers. Of some, only a single wall remained standing. Pug thumped the walls to see if they'd collapse; one of them did, with a roar that made the ground shake.

"Peter Stevens!"

Pug stood transfixed.

"What did you do to that wall?"

"Nothing, Miss Wipple. I just touched it and it fell down."

"Peter, I'm not going to stand for any more of your nonsense! That tower you've destroyed was priceless—do you realize that?—priceless from a historical point of view. I'm going to deal with you severely when we get home!"

She resumed her discussion of Martian architecture.

They ate lunch on the bank of a

dried-up canal. One boy got too near the edge and tumbled in; when he crawled out he was covered all over with red dirt. He looked very funny. Miss Wipple said he did it on purpose and sent him back to the rocket for an hour.

● **A**T THREE O'CLOCK THEY straggled back to the valley where the spaceship sat like a metal egg poked on end in the ground. The valley was a mile-wide bowl of rocks, red sand, and scrubby plants. On the rim of the bowl, the city stuck broken fingers into the sky.

"Aww-w-w, Miss Wipple, do we have to go home so soon?"

"Please, Miss Wipple, can't we stay just a little bit longer?"

"Well," the teacher relented, "I suppose it will be all right. If I let you play here for another hour, will you promise not to leave the valley? Perhaps you can find some souvenirs. Why, only last week when the sixth grade were here, someone dug up a beautiful plastic sandal that must have belonged to an ancient Martian! Won't it be exciting if you can bring home something like that? Now I want you back here at four o'clock. *Promptly!*"

In truth, Miss Wipple welcomed a little more time on Mars. The pilot of the spaceship had wide shoulders, a bronze tan, an interesting grin. Miss Wipple's twenties had slipped quickly by, without any offers of matrimony; she had made up her mind that her thirties were going to be different.

"Yahoo!"

"We've got another hour!"

"That big dune's mine to dig in!"

The kids scattered like spilled mercury. All but two of them.

"Otto," said Pug as they trudged across the sand.

"What?"

"Would you be very excited if you found the old shoe off a Martian?"

"Not very," Otto admitted.

"Well, we'd better start looking anyway; Miss Wipple will be mad if we don't dig up something."

They broke sticks from a thorn-bush and poked around in the sand

for a few minutes. It was more fun to duel with the sticks. They parried. Pug tapped Otto in the stomach twice. "Drop dead!" he shrieked. "I got you square through the belly!"

"Aaa-a-ah, you never touched me!"

"How much you wanna bet I didn't? You're dead, boy!"

"I quit," said Otto; "you don't fight fair."

Pug's ire was aroused. He prided himself on his sportsmanship. "Oh don't I? Take off your glasses and I'll show you how fair I fight!"

"I won't fight," said Otto.

"Yaaa-a-a. If they broke you open, your guts'd be yellow. Look. I'll draw a line. Come on, step over it, I double dare you—just take one step, that's all!" The end of Pug's stick scraped a little ditch in the sand.

Clink! Something made a sound like glass being hit.

Pug's jaw sagged. He prodded the sand again. This time some of the sand brushed away and a patch of brightness glittered into view.

Otto sucked in his breath. He made a dive for the shining thing, but Pug was faster. Pug's hand plowed into Otto's face, shoving Otto's nose flat. "It's mine! I found it!" Pug cried.

"I only wanted to look at it," Otto grumbled.

On hands and knees Pug examined his find. He let out a whistle of surprise. "Holy space! This ain't no old shoe! C'mere, Otto, help me dig!"

Excitedly, they scooped sand away. Soon the burnt-red sunlight shone on a hemisphere of glassy stuff like an upside-down goldfish bowl. "Keep digging," Otto gritted. "There's more of it buried yet."

Pug's arms burrowed deep into the sand. "I—I've got it, almost!" Teeth clenched. Sweat ran. Ten-year-old muscles tightened into knots. Pug grunted and heaved and slowly the mass came free.

● **I**T WAS A TRANSPARENT case, perhaps forty inches from end to end. Something red and wrinkled lay inside. An enormous head. Thin, tapering hands. Great

eyes, larger than teacups, closed as if in sleep.

"It's—it's a man!"

"It's a Martin," Pug breathed.

"But—but there aren't any more Martins! Miss Wipple said all animal life on Mars is ex—ex—"

"Extinct," Pug finished. "That means dead."

"Is *this one* dead?"

"I don't know. It looks like a picture I saw in my Dad's doctor books of a baby when it's still inside the mother!"

"But this looks *old!*" Otto's voice was edged with wonder. "It's all kind of . . . shriveled up!"

"Look!" said Pug. "It's not heavy—I—I can carry it!"

His knees buckled beneath the weight.

"*Watch out!*" Otto squealed.

Pug fought to keep his grip on the slippery surface. The case executed a neat flip in the air and bounced off a rock. There was a sickening tinkle like broken glass.

"Oh—oh," said Otto. "Now you've done it."

Pug felt his insides slowly turning to ice. "I—I didn't mean to do it!" he quavered. "It just slipped!"

The "Martin" was stirring. Wrinkled hands beat like bird wings in the air. The great eyelids flickered . . . slowly parted . . . and then the "Martin" was looking right at them.

There weren't any pupils in his eyes.

Water! The thought leaped into their minds: wetness flowing in colorless drops, liquid and cool. The thought was a hundred times more vivid than a spoken word.

"Martin wants water!" said Otto. "He's thirsty!"

"I'll get him some!" Pug yipped. "Stay with him! Don't let him get away!" His feet chopped sand as he streaked for the rocket.

● **MISS WIPPLE HAD BEEN** progressing nicely. She had just been remarking to the pilot that it must be wonderful to guide a ship through the infinite spaces, and the pilot replied how much more wonderful it was to guide young minds, and the pilot was sitting very

close to her. Then footsteps went *thumm thumm thumm* on the ladder outside. The port banged open and Pug came stampeding in.

"Miss Wipple! Got anything I can carry water in?"

"What do you want to carry water for?" she snapped.

Pug hesitated. It wouldn't do to tell Miss Wipple about Martin yet; she might spoil all the fun.

"I—I want to water a plant I found."

"All right, then—take that canteen but be sure you don't lose it."

"Oh no, ma'am, I won't." Pug snatched up the canteen, pressed it to the drinking fountain until water ran over the top. Then off he scampered, not bothering to screw the stopper on. The port clanged after him.

Damn brat, thought Miss Wipple.

The pilot chuckled. "Aren't kids great? With enthusiasm over a plant! Doris, I'll trade jobs with you any day—you must get a real kick out of teaching youngsters like that."

"Oh yes," said Miss Wipple with a demure smile, "it's really not a job—it's a pleasure."

● **WHEN PUG GOT BACK** with the water, Martin was sitting up.

"You spilled half of it," said Otto.

"Well what did you expect? I had to run with it, didn't I?" Pug stood there catching his breath. "Has he been talking to you?"

"Well—yes, I guess so—only he doesn't *talk*, exactly. He just thinks something and it's there inside your head. But his thoughts don't come out the same way ours do. It—it makes me feel funny to listen to him!"

Martin sipped water slowly.

Come . . . you . . . from where? The question was clear and unmistakable.

"We come from Earth," said Pug excitedly. "You know. Earth. Terra. Third planet." With a stick, he scratched four lopsided circles in the sand, then set a big rock in the center. "That's the sun in the middle there and those circles are the orbits of the planets. This one's Mercury and that's Venus, and Earth—"

that's where we come from—and here's Mars. Savvy?"

Martin nodded. Slyly, insistently, he thought crept forth: *Water... like this... on Earth... there is?*

"Water? Oh sure, oceans and oceans of it. Earth is three-fourths covered with water—that's what our geography book says."

"Ask him how he got here," said Otto.

Martin had heard the question. His eyes narrowed to crescents; his wrinkled mouth frowned in concentration. Rapidly, he sketched pictures in their minds.

"Better than television," Pug breathed.

The city was young. Its towers were white—not stained red with dust, not crumbling. Beside a canal, a handful of "Martins" stood, watching the waters fall lower. Islands of mud emerged and joined other islands until at last no water flowed. And then the "Martins" walked back to their city and entered glass cases, to sleep until a better time should come. Machines shelved the cases row on row in vaults beneath the city. Machines scooped holes in the desert, deposited other sleepers, and brushed the sand back again carefully, like robots planting glass seeds. Then the machines stood idle in the desert and the last rains of Mars washed metal into rust until the machines fell down and blended with the sand.

The pictures ended.

● **PUG'S LIPS WORKED A** long time before words spilled out: "Those vaults underneath the city! Maybe—maybe the others are alive yet!" And deep down inside, he was praying: *Let Martin take us there. Let me and Otto open some more glass cases and bring all the Martins back to life...* In his mind's eye, he stood upon a flag-draped platform in front of wildly cheering throngs, while the President of the United States hung solid gold stars all over his chest.

Behind slitted eyes, Martin was making plans. *We... shall go*, his answer finally came.

"Whoops!" yelled Otto, turning cartwheels.

Martin raised himself as if he weighed a ton. His withered legs collapsed from under him and he tumbled helplessly in the sand.

"Aw," said Pug sympathetically, "he shouldn't try to walk. He's been sleeping in that case so long his legs have shrunk."

"What'll we do?"

"We'll just have to carry him, that's all."

Gently as though he were picking up a kitten, Pug cradled Martin in his arms.

Nobody watched them leave the valley.

● **THEY HAD COME FAR—** just how far beneath the city, Pug couldn't even guess. They had ripped aside bricks from the spot Martin had indicated, and as they plodded downward Pug had counted steps until he couldn't count any more.

Their feet kicked up puffs of dust that got into their noses and made them sneeze. Pug was happy. He was thinking: *Nobody, not even the scientists and explorers, ever saw what we're seeing now!* The beam of Otto's pocket flash swept picture-covered walls. "Martins" planted and harvested... hunted... long-dead animals... dredged a network of canals across the sands. There were pockmarks in the pictures where precious stones had dropped out long ago.

Martin lay quietly in Pug's arms. From time to time a thought stole forth: *To the left... stairway turns. Take care... next step... broken. Now stairs end... corridor begins.*

The dust grew deeper, overflowed their shoes. Pug listened, half expecting the chitter of rats, but in the shadows of the corridor the only sound was the thud of his own footfalls and Otto's, faintly echoing. Pug caught a snatch of Martin's thoughts. *Weapons, the thoughts ran over and over again. Workable yet?* A question, worried and impatient. *Must find. Determination.* And then the thoughts retreated and grew secret and Pug couldn't follow them any more.

In one place, stone blocks had tumbled down, almost walling up the passageway. They had to do some climbing before they could go on. "Pug," said Otto, "don't—don't you think maybe we ought to stop? I mean—wouldn't it be better if we just said goodbye to Martin and came back some other time, maybe?"

"Huh!" Pug snorted. "You're not turning chicken on me! For cripe-sake. Otto, the other kids would just about die to be here now!"

A block of stone, dislodged by their voices, boomed somewhere in the darkness.

"Well I wouldn't," Otto snuffled.

Just ahead, the beam of the flashlight shone on doors of black corroded metal. There were a couple of funny things about the doors. For one thing, they came together horizontally, not vertically, in the middle. For another thing, the doors were graven with a strange design: a maze of lines that twisted in and out of itself. The way Pug felt when he looked at it, he had felt one time before. Once, at a carnival, he had peered into a basket full of snakes.

Martin squirmed impatiently in Pug's arms. *Down!* he commanded. *Can...now...walk!* He tumbled out of Pug's grasp. Eagerness seemed to give strength to his withered legs. He staggered toward the doors, found and pressed a hidden stud. Suddenly with a rasp the doors parted, one sliding upward, the other dropping, like the jaws of a dead man opening.

LIGHT SURGED INTO their eyes. Blinded, Pug and Otto groped their way across the threshold, following Martin. They found themselves within a chamber so vast that it took a full minute to soften into its right proportions. At one time or another during his ten year life, Pug had visited Mammoth Cave, Grand Central Rocketport, and the Capitol Building in New Washington. But all those places seemed miniature now, beside the immensity of the room. An eerie white radiance filtered through the walls, in which marbles of radioactive material were

imbedded. If he squinted, Pug could barely make out the ceiling.

In the center of the room stood a bubble of glass about four feet high, shaped like a mushroom on a stem. Martin skittered toward it. *He seems awful anxious about something*, thought Pug.

The little red man hammered at the crown of the mushroom with rolled-up fists. The glass shattered, and Martin thrust quivering arms into the opening he had made. He drew forth a golden jar with serpentine handles, which he set on the floor very carefully, he fished into the broken mushroom again and again, produced cones, blocks, pyramids...vases with bright green spots all over...yellow cylinders covered with spikes. Martian thoughts filled the room, gloating and exultant: *Safe...after...such a long time!*

Pug was itching with curiosity. What in heck was so important about a pile of old crockery? The Martian's back was turned now. Placing one foot after the other stealthily, Pug edged toward the collection of pyramids and globes and cones. Martin was hunched over, examining one of the bright-colored objects, apparently too deeply engrossed to notice Pug. A fat, gold-speckled jar caught Pug's fancy. He grabbed it.

Martin, Pug concluded, must have eyes in the back of his head someplace. The little red man suddenly whirled—a clawlike hand shot out, wrenched the jar from Pug's grasp.

Pug scowled. "Aaa-aah, you don't have to get so uppity—I wasn't going to hurt your jug!"

Amusement flickered briefly across Martin's face. *Watch*, he thought at them. He pointed the mouth of the jar toward the floor and carefully squeezed. There was a blinding flash as a beam darted out—and when the beam vanished, a small round pit in the floor remained.

"Whew!" Pug breathed. "If I had one of those jars, I could lick a whole army, I bet!"

For the first time, Martin smiled. Suddenly Pug remembered. "The other sleepers!"

Martin's gesture swept the room.

"You mean," said Pug unbelievably, "there are that many."

In answer, Martin selected a large cone striped like a peppermint stick. He touched a finger to the cone's base. Out of the point, rays came. The rays bit into one of the shining walls and ate deep. A slice of the wall melted, and through the opening they could see shelves of sleeping Martians like embryos in laboratory bottles.

Otto was leaping up and down with excitement. "Oboyoboy! Wait'll I tell the other kids about this!"

Martin seemed interested. *Other beings...like you...how many came?*

"Eighteen fellas and girls—not counting Miss Wipple, that is."

Miss Wipple?

"She's our teacher," Pug explained.

For a moment, it was as though a finger had been touched lightly to Pug's brain. The invisible finger probed gently, then withdrew. Somehow, Pug had a feeling that Martin knew all about Miss Wipple now.

Again, Martin attempted a withered smile. He succeeded in looking like a death's head.

Gifts I have...for you...not for...Miss Wipple...bring the others...here.

Pug's eyes bulged. "You mean all the kids?"

Bring...all...of them.

"You betcha, Marty! We'll bring 'em! You just wait right here!"

● **EIGHTEEN KIDS, DIGGING** in the sand, glanced up. Two clouds of dust were rolling down the valley. As the clouds drew nearer, they developed voices.

"Hey, you guys!"

"And the girls too!"

"C'mere and listen!"

"Aaa-a-ah, Pug's got a bee in his pants again," somebody snickered. But just the same, the diggers dropped their sticks and legged over to see what all the shouting was about. Soon a ring of questioning faces surrounded Otto and Pug.

"We found a Martin!" Pug panted.

"You're nuts!" hooted the ring.

"Honest! Cross my heart and hope to die we did! He took us down underneath the city and showed us lit-

tle jars that can blow the whole world apart! If you think I'm fibbing come on and see for yourselves!"

Skepticism was slipping from the circle of faces. Pug's story sounded good. They really wanted to believe it.

"Well-l-l—Miss Wipple said we aren't supposed to leave the valley."

"Ah, we'll be back in ten minutes; she won't even miss us."

"And the Martin said he had presents for everybody," Otto chimed in.

That clinched it.

"Let's go!" someone shouted.

"Well let's go, then," said a fat girl, "but if there isn't any Martin, we'll toss you in the canal, Pug Stevens."

"There's a Martin, all right," promised Pug.

● **A** LONG THE CORRIDOR, twenty excited children shoved and jostled. Boys shouted to make stone blocks crash down and scare the girls. The girls giggled nervously. And somebody struck up the age-old chant—

No more pencils, no more books!

No more teacher's ugly looks!

One girl started sobbing—she was scared, she wanted to go home—but they slapped her until she just whimpered and didn't cry out loud any more.

"Jeez, what kind of presents are we going to get?"

"Atom guns!"

"Time travel machines!"

"Gold and—and diamonds!"

"No," said Otto with an air of superiority, "it'll be better than that. You'll see."

And then the flashlight cast a yellow moon on the doors where geometric snakes coiled. Something about the doors made all the talking and laughter stop. Pug stumbled forward, his fingers groping for the stud. Even before he found it, the doors yawned wide—and the children clumped into the room, rubbing the light from their eyes.

A semicircle of "Martins" stood watching.

The children halted. They stared. They wanted to turn, wanted to run, wanted to be a thousand miles away, but none would show the others he was afraid. It just couldn't be. The whole thing was a scare movie, the kind you see for a quarter, all just make-believe. Soon the projector would grind to a stop, the Martins would go away. Yet there stood the Martins, twenty of them, their white no-pupil eyes glinting beneath strange helmets of steel.

The homesick girl stifled a scream. Behind the children, doors bumped shut.

Inside his chest, Pug's heart was drumming so hard he thought it would burst through. The other kids were nudging him forward. He forced himself to put on a brave front. "We—we brought the others," he quavered, "like we said we would!"

His words sounded small and ten-year-old in the bright ancient room.

The girls huddled together nervously, and their dresses made a rustling, uneasy sound. The boys shuffled their feet uncertainly and glanced about with wonder in their eyes.

Then Martin drifted slowly forward, and a thought leaped into the children's minds: *Gifts... I promised... for you.*

Martin removed his metal helmet and extended it to Pug.

Pug hesitated. He felt all tense and scared deep down inside. It wasn't the kind of fear that comes from knowing something is about to happen; it was an unreasoning fear that came instinctively, warning him, he didn't know why.

Pug took the helmet as gingerly as if it were fire, but as he held it he couldn't help admiring it. It looked almost like a football helmet, only with wires running all around and two little antennas that wobbled on top. It fit Pug loosely, but his ears propped it up.

And now the other "Martins" were gliding forward, offering a metal headpiece to each child. The children accepted the gifts, timidly at first, then eagerly when they saw the other kids wearing them.

● **A**ND THEN ALL OF A sudden Pug had a funny feeling. He tried to move his arms, tried to take a step, but he couldn't. It was as if his body had turned to stone. A bubbling scream welled out of Pug's throat. The helmet started to vibrate, it droned, it seemed to tighten about his skull. His gaze grew blurry, as though he were seeing everything through waves of heat. The other kids were tearing at their helmets, their fingers clawing helplessly against the steel. And Pug heard Otto's wail of terror—"I can't get it off—it won't let go!"—then Pug's senses were gone, like lights switched out. A river of shadow was spilling into his brain, drowning every part of him that was awake. It was dark, so dark, and the river flowed faster and faster until he felt himself going down before the force of the torrent; then the waters closed above him with a rush and all was dark.

The droning stopped.

The Martians lay tumbled about the room like old rag dolls, carelessly dropped and forgotten.

Cords vibrated in Pug's throat. Words came with difficulty, as if Pug's voice were a tool that its user hadn't mastered yet.

"We...no longer shall need... these things."

Children's footsteps padded softly. Children's arms worked slowly, picking up the Martian bodies like so much cordwood, stacking them, building a pyre. When the last body had been carefully laid in place, the children stood there waiting.

Otto's fingers gripped a jar.

"Now?" asked Otto's voice.

"Now," Pug's voice said.

A pencil-thin beam came out of the jar and scribbled across the heaped-up bodies. Then it winked out.

Dust motes settled to the floor, spiraling a long slow time as they fell.

● **M**ISS WIPPLE WAS NOW positively boiling. When the last child had clambered up the ladder into the ship, her jaw began to function.

"For heaven's sake, where have you people been! Just look at the

time! It's quarter to five! If you can't learn to be grown-ups and accept responsibility, we just aren't going to take any more rocket trips—not ever any more!”

Children's feet shuffled guiltily.

Children's eyes studied the floor. “Very sorry...are we...Miss Wipple,” Pug's voice said.

“Peter Stevens! Is that any way to put your sentences together? And after all I've talked about the subject at the predicate! You've been playing in the city, that's where you've been. I think we'd better have stay-after-school all the rest of this week—”

Suddenly Miss Whipple stopped short. She stared. The children were carrying strange-looking objects. Cones, blue globes, pyramids. Speckled vases with curious handles. Little green jars with coils wrapped around them. Shiny gray cylinders studded with knobs.

“Wh-where did you get these things?”

“In the sand,” Pug's voice said. “We wanted...something...to take home.”

Miss Wipple snatched up a vase of translucent amber, turned it over and over, with bulging eyes. How ancient it looked! How exquisitely made! “Good Lord,” she murmured incredulously. “early Martian pottery!”

Oh, there was no doubt about it—the children had stumbled on a really important find! The archeologists back on Earth were sure to be interested. Maybe the papers would print a big story all about it, complete with Miss Wipple's picture—

“Well, Peter, what did I tell you?” she beamed as the rocket leaped into space. “Didn't I say you'd dig up something to take back home? What beautiful things—why, I can't get over it! Won't your parents be surprised!”

Pug smiled.

“Oh, yes...Miss Wipple,” Pug's voice purred ever so softly. “They will be...surprised.”

Earth was one small glitter in the diamond field of stars.

