

# Marty & the Sage

## Background

Marty and the Sage live in a small country town in New Zealand. The name of the town is rather long, and difficult for foreigners to pronounce, and is, in any case of no consequence being as imaginary as the characters themselves.

Marty is a young man in his twenties who gets by doing odd jobs, and especially fruit picking in the season, from strawberries through to grapes. Most of the grapes go on to make wine, though Marty has no part in that, and he doesn't even drink the stuff. The Sage makes up for that lack in loyalty to local produce.

Marty, as his name suggests, is by origin a Martian. Messing about in space one day, doing the celestial equivalent of wheelies and burnouts, the sort of thing that boy racers do, he came a cropper and crashed-landed his flying saucer in this remote part of the Earth. The saucer was a bit of a write-off, but Marty was unhurt. He could have activated his emergency beacon and waited for help. He wasn't the first Martian who had crashed in this part of the solar system. But...

But, the saucer wasn't insured and the fitness certificate was expired. He owed a few blokes some money and things weren't so good at home. Moreover, and this was the clincher, military service was looming. Military service on Mars is long and arduous and although most Martians eagerly anticipate it, and look back afterwards with nostalgia, Marty didn't share their enthusiasm. He couldn't quite see the point of doing something unpleasant and potentially dangerous when Mars didn't have any real enemies anyway. It was far more powerful than any of its neighbours and none of them had mastered space travel, not like the Martians who were inveterate space travellers. He knew that Earth was a pretty violent place but that New Zealand was relatively un-militaristic. It didn't take Marty long to decide that it made much more sense to 'go to earth' as he said to himself, roaring with laughter. Martians have a rather strange sense of humour.

Now Martians have a remarkable facility, as a result of their long experience in space travel, in being able to assume the form, and speak the language, of the locals wherever they land. So it was no great challenge for Marty to walk into the local town and pass himself off as an Aucklander. Most New Zealanders outside that city – by far the largest in the country – regard Aucklanders with some amusement (or is it envy?) as being of a different species, so anything he didn't get quite right was put down to that. He picked up some work, got somewhere to live, and soon settled in. No papers of course, but in New Zealand that is no great problem, except for a driving licence, which some people have, and some don't. Marty knew that it would be a good idea to have one of those and decided that the best place to get one that someone else wasn't using, or no longer had a use for being dead, was the local pub. So that's where he went, and that's how he became acquainted with the Sage

The Sage had a proper, official, name of course but Marty thought what's the point in using that when you have a nickname with cachet? The Sage was elderly – at least 70 Marty thought. It seemed that before he retired and moved to the country he had worked in a city as a bureaucrat, or a

teacher, or perhaps even a journalist. No one was quite sure and the Sage did not like talking about his past. But he did like talking about current international events, and in Marty he found a keen and critical listener.

Martians, as is well known, are very curious and inquisitive. Whether this was the cause, or the result, of their passion for space travel is uncertain. However, in this respect Marty was a typical Martian; he had a thirst for knowledge. But at home, and even more so on Earth, he was a special case, he was very critical and discerning. He wanted to know what was going on, but he wasn't to be fobbed off with clichés, cant, and twaddle. He soon realised that the television news, for instance, was fool's gold – it appeared to be giving a real insight with all those graphic images, and on-the-spot reports, but when looked at closely proved to have no substance. It was nonsense or worse. Marty had a singular advantage in developing a critical appraisal of news reports, government publications, and even academic articles. His English was flawless. It was precise but not stilted. He had an easy command of idiom but knew his grammar and the meaning of words. His English, said the Sage, was even better than that of the Dutch whom he had, until then, considered the gold standard for foreigners speaking English. But Marty's advantage critically went beyond that. He had not been educated on Earth. He had not been socialised in the way that everyone around him, including the Sage, had. He had not been brought up in a family, had not spent countless hours in classrooms having 'facts' drummed into him, being told what reality was like. He had not spent hours glued to television. He had not been forced to go to church. He had not been subjected day after day, year after year, to a continuous barrage of propaganda and persuasion from all quarters – family, peers, governments, companies, media, churches, political parties and pundits of various kinds – telling him what reality was, telling him what was beyond his horizon, and how to interpret what was within his horizon. In short, he had not been subjected to the indoctrination that the rest of us is subject to, usually without being aware of it.

If the emperor were to walk down the street without any clothes on, with the crowds applauding the style of his dress and the quality of its tailoring, Marty would instantly see that he was naked. He would not necessarily point that out to the other bystanders, because he had soon realised that life would be intolerable, even in this small New Zealand town, without some degree of caution and holding his tongue. Similarly he told no one he was Martian, though the Sage eventually wormed that out of him. But it was frustrating, perhaps annoying, to live among people whose understanding of the world around them was so frequently constrained and distorted. Most of them had no great problem with life around them and tasks to hand. Their personal lives were perhaps an exception to this, and Earthlings tended to have such a huge difficulty navigated thought their sex lives that Marty occasionally longed for the simplicity of life on Mars.<sup>1</sup> They could plant seeds that grew into productive plants, they could drive their cars at foolish speeds along winding roads, usually without crashing, and they could build houses which, though often ugly and frequently leaky, did not fall down. In other words, they coped pretty well with immediate reality, things within arm's reach. However, when it came to things which were mediated through external knowledge – things for instance which were in the papers or on television – then to Marty it seemed that they were prey to all sorts of foolish ideas and to what he subsequently learnt (probably from the Sage) was called false consciousness.

That was why he found the Sage such congenial and stimulating company, a sentiment equally reciprocated. He could ask the Sage questions without being told he was 'off the planet' for

harbouring such doubts. Marty quite liked the phrase 'off the planet' and used it quite frequently. The Sage, for his part, enjoyed what he called the 'Socratic dialogues' with Marty. The Sage wasn't much given to pretentious phrases, but he seemed to regard this one appropriate. Or perhaps it was tongue in cheek; it was difficult to tell with the Sage.

Marty and the Sage would often meet in a quiet corner of the local pub of an evening. The Sage with a glass of wine in front of him, and a laptop to hand, and Marty with a cocktail or a beer. They would talk about the events of the day and often talk about an article, or two, that one or the other had come across.

The inquisitive Marty would probe, and the Sage attempt to explain, what was in the article and how it might be interpreted.

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<sup>1</sup> All Martians, of course, are male. The process by which they procreate is either not known, or too disturbing to investigate, but by all accounts it appears much less messy than that on Earth.