

My name is Roy Livingston.

Self portrait

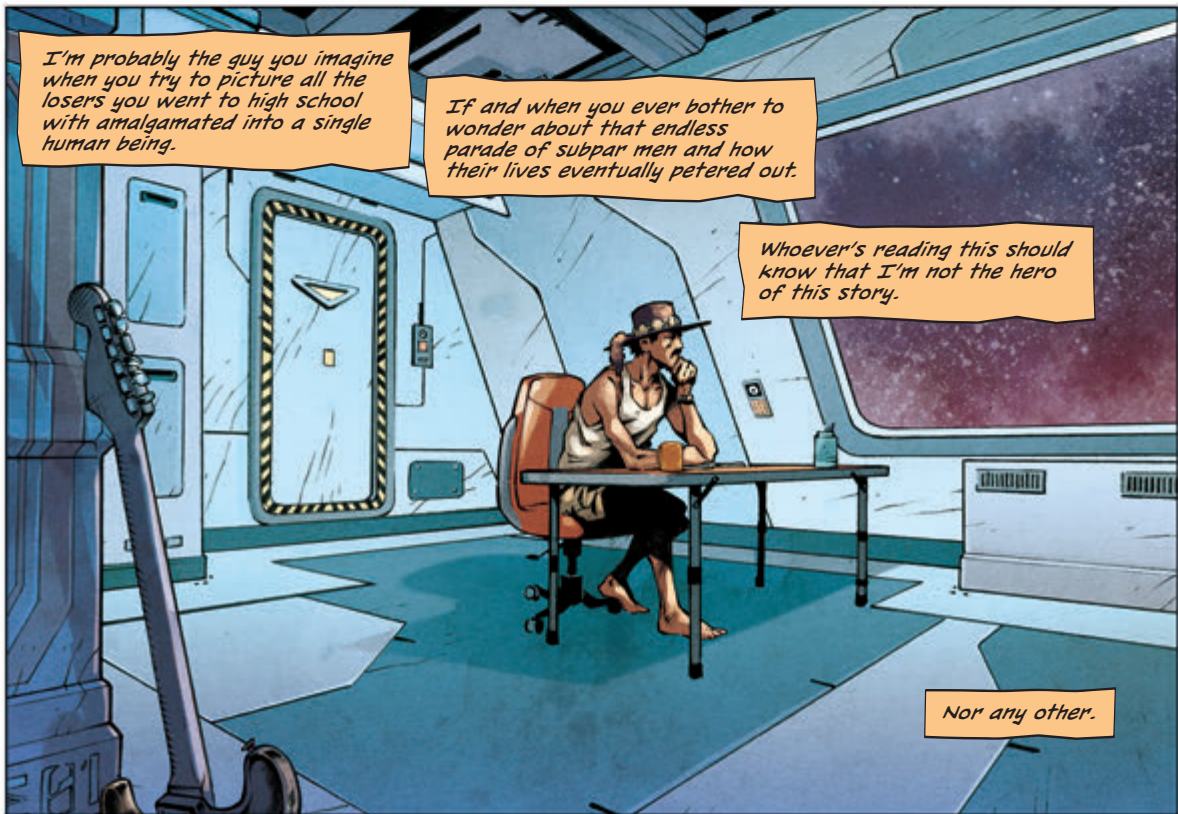
My name is Roy Livingston.



I wasn't "college material," which, when I was young, was a polite shorthand for saying that I would end up dead in a war or under a bridge or in some sort of hamburger robbery.

I'm divorced. And until one week ago, I was the manager of a pet store in Eufaula, Alabama.

The town where I was born and grew into uneventful manhood.



I'm probably the guy you imagine when you try to picture all the losers you went to high school with amalgamated into a single human being.

If and when you ever bother to wonder about that endless parade of subpar men and how their lives eventually petered out.

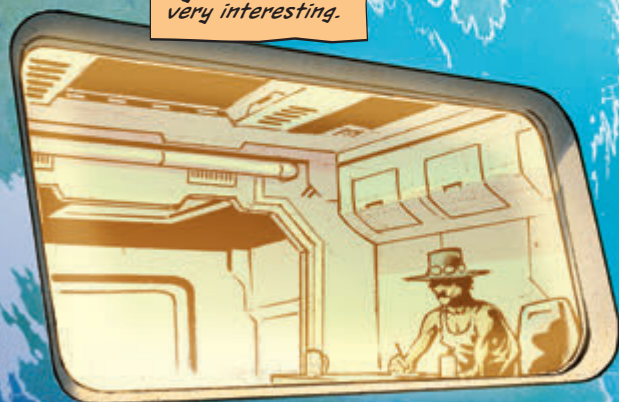
Whoever's reading this should know that I'm not the hero of this story.

Nor any other.

JUNE 23RD, 2048.



*My life was never
very interesting.*



*Of course, a lot
has **changed** over
the past week.*

So how does one go from being the manager at the third largest pet store in Southern Alabama...

ERIMHON.
SHOW ME THE NEWS.



**ALABAMA MIGHT
BECOME FIRST TO
SET FOOT ON MARS.**

**ENERGY RIOTS
CONTINUE FOR THIRD
STRAIGHT WEEK**

**MARKET FALTERS
AS ENERGY STOCKS
IN FREEFALL**

...to being the most famous human being on the planet?



Well, I suppose that's the unlikely story I'm hoping to tell here.

Eufaula, Alabama was known as the **Big Bass Capital of the World**.

Or, at least, that's what we told ourselves. I doubt most people thought too much about where to go for a big bass pilgrimage.

So, in truth, we weren't really known at all.

My father was a history buff. He was also obsessed with obituaries. Which is what history is, I suppose. The world's running obituary column.

WELL, WILL YOU LOOK AT THAT?

To my Dad, the worst fate imaginable was to be found unworthy of three lines in the *Montgomery Advertiser*.

GUY STEPPED ON A LANDMINE AFTER SAVING HIS PLATOON IN AFGHANISTAN.

NOW, THAT'S AN OBITUARY!

BUT BEFORE I DROPPED OUT OF SCHOOL I TOLD MY TEACHER-- NO, I **DON'T** KNOW THE PYTHAGOREAN THEOREM.

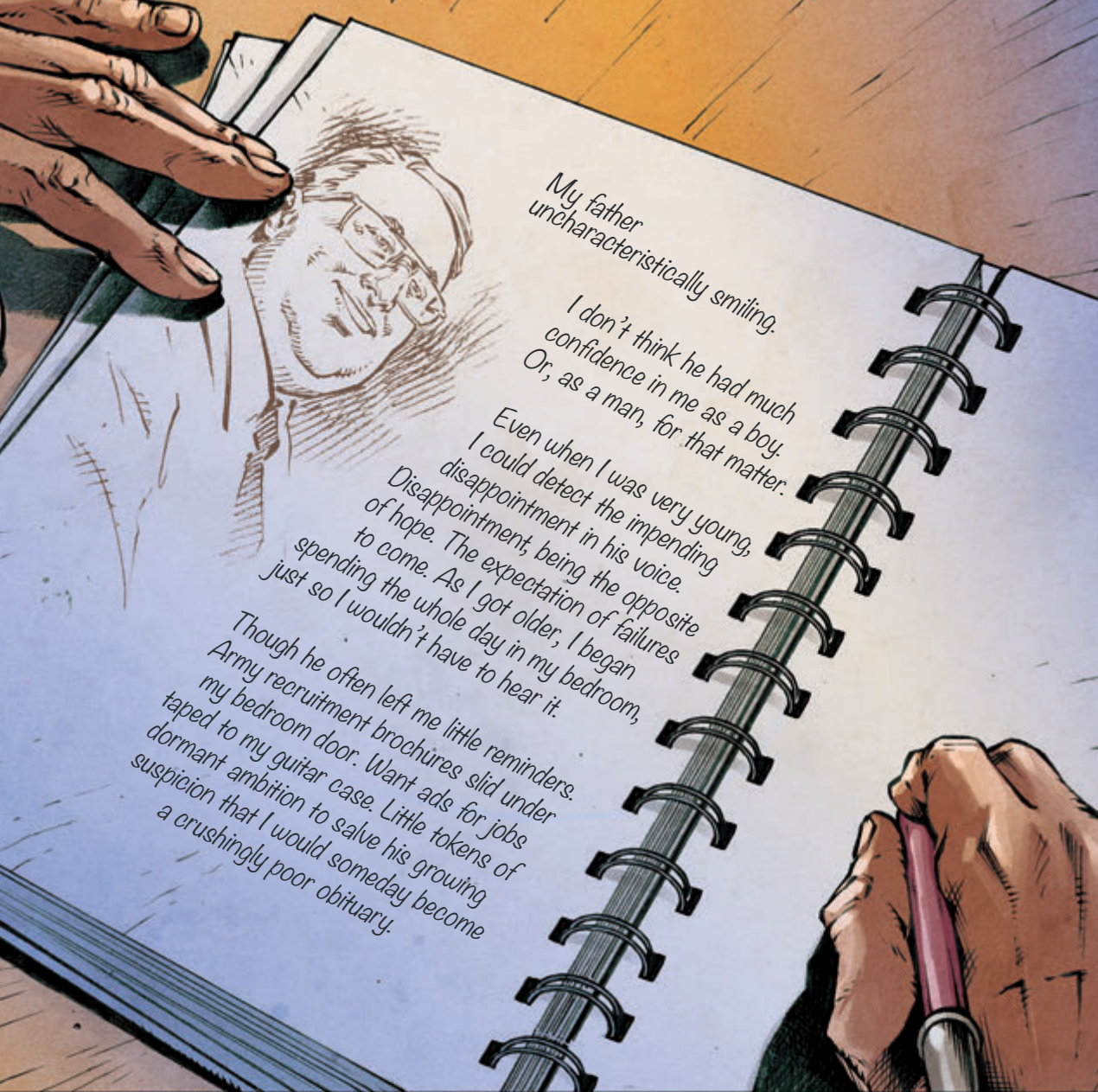
BUT I KNOW WHERE I'M **GOING** WHEN I **DIE**...

DO YOU?

It probably didn't help that he was a Pentecostal. Believing, like most Pentecostals, that the only part of a story that truly matters is the end.

Though, as far as endings go, I suppose I've done pretty well for myself.



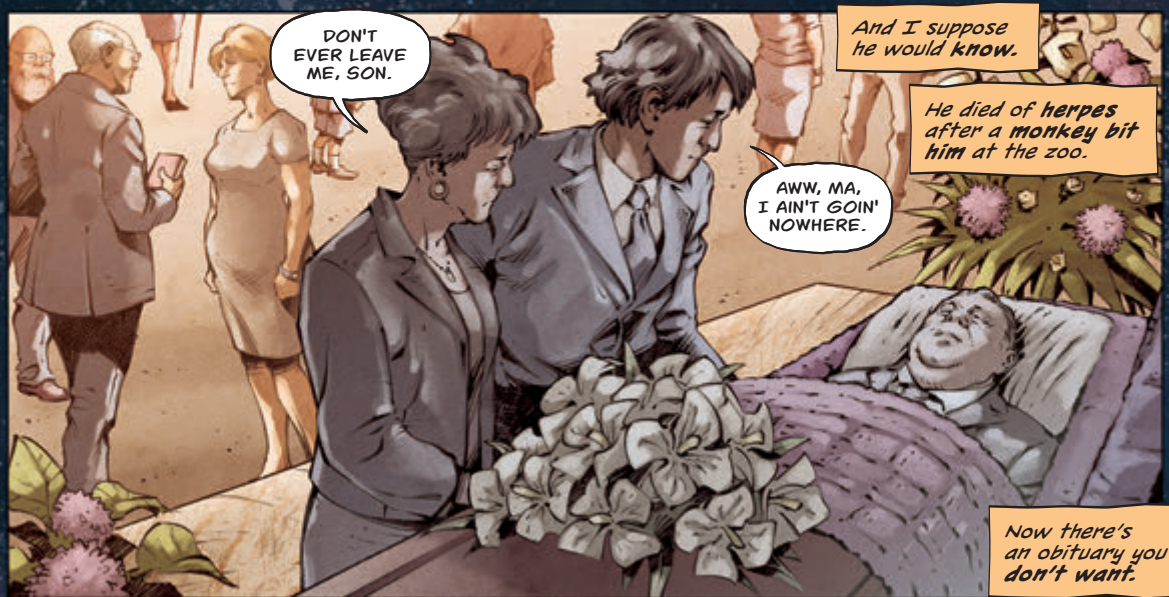


My father
uncharacteristically smiling.

I don't think he had much
confidence in me as a boy.
Or, as a man, for that matter.

Even when I was very young,
I could detect the impending
disappointment in his voice.
The expectation of failures
to come. As I got older, I began
spending the whole day in my bedroom,
just so I wouldn't have to hear it.

Though he often left me little reminders.
Army recruitment brochures slid under
my bedroom door. Want ads for jobs
taped to my guitar case. Little tokens of
dormant ambition to save his growing
suspicion that I would someday become
a crushingly poor obituary.



DON'T
EVER LEAVE
ME, SON.

And I suppose
he would know.

He died of herpes
after a monkey bit
him at the zoo.

AWW, MA,
I AIN'T GOIN'
NOWHERE.

Now there's
an obituary you
don't want.



But don't be too hard on him.

In the end, we're all lint rollers, picking up pain and regret as we roll along, strangely unable to put any of it down.



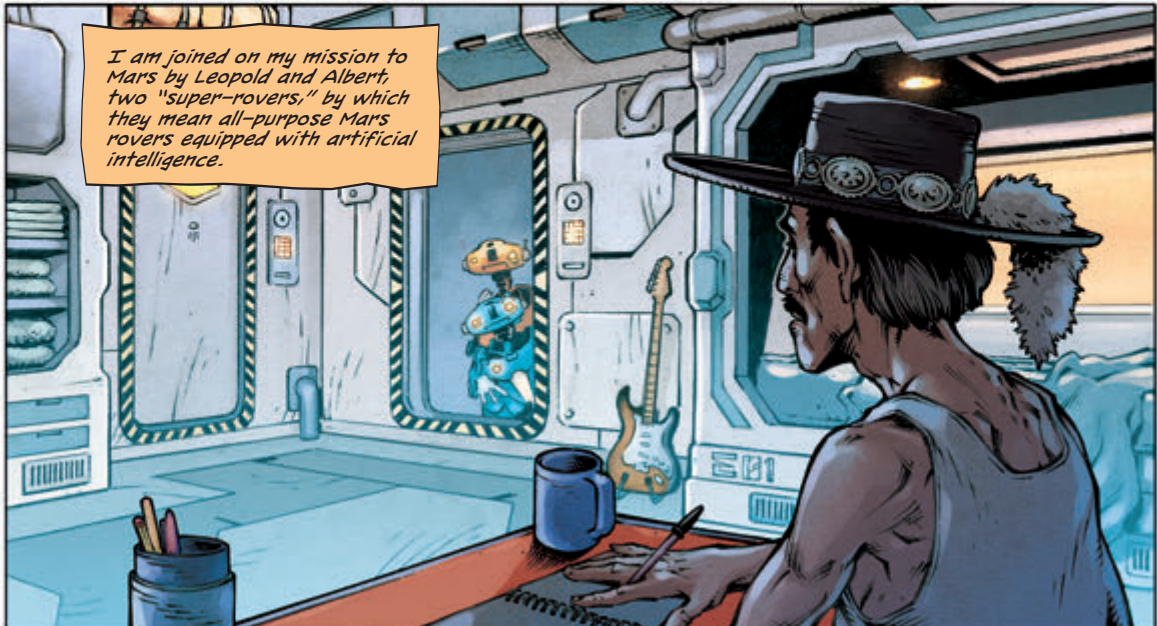
Perhaps because, inside, we all suspect that healing is a form of forgetting.

And it's better to be in pain.

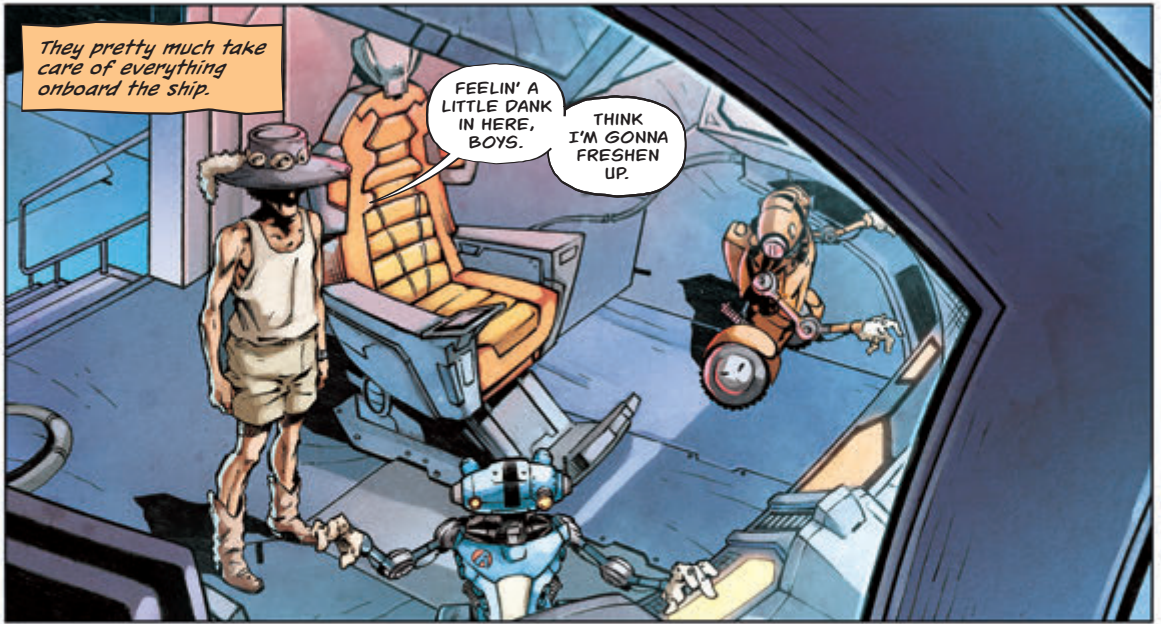


In my experience, people are little more than walking accumulations of regret. And none moreso than myself.

But that's skipping to the end. And, despite my Pentecostal upbringing, I don't want to get there any faster than I have to.



I am joined on my mission to Mars by Leopold and Albert, two "super-rovers," by which they mean all-purpose Mars rovers equipped with artificial intelligence.



They pretty much take care of everything onboard the ship.

FEELIN' A LITTLE DANK IN HERE, BOYS.

THINK I'M GONNA FRESHEN UP.

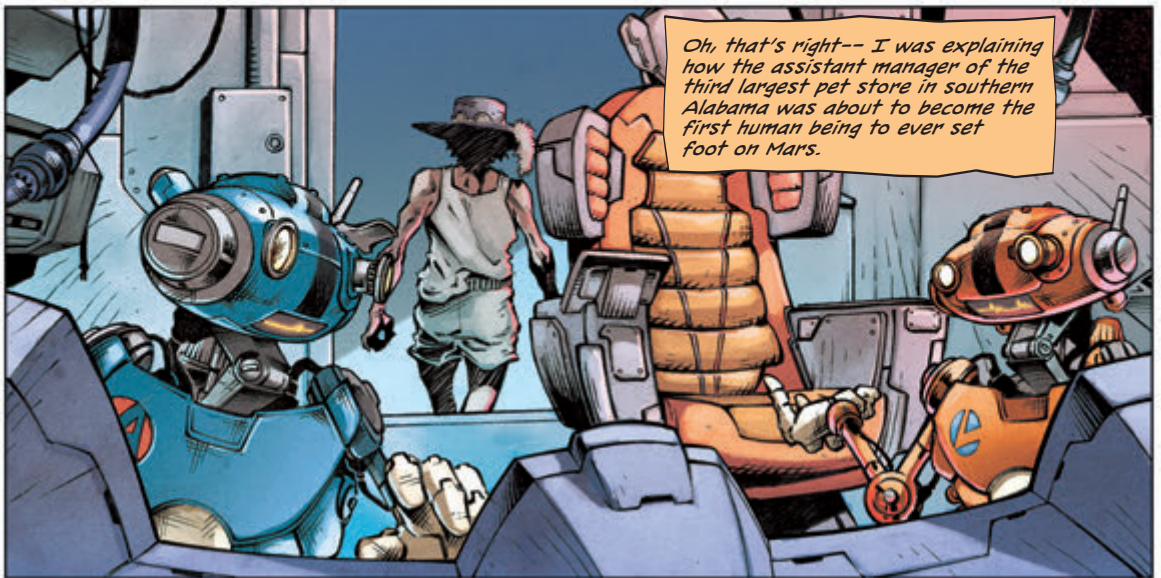


In fact, my one and only duty onboard the Erimphon is to turn a knob that cleans the oxygen supply whenever the air gets a little stale.



For some unclear reason, this makes the whole ship smell like peanut butter for about an hour.

HMM...



Oh, that's right-- I was explaining how the assistant manager of the third largest pet store in southern Alabama was about to become the first human being to ever set foot on Mars.

My circuitous journey from pet store manager to space adventurer began two years ago on the planet Mars.

A rover, one of the very first super-rovers ever sent to Mars, sent an unexpected message back to Earth.

That it had found a massive deposit of concentrated natural gas deep below the surface.

An enormous untapped energy resource, created during the lush and verdant ancient past of Mars.

Big news for a dying planet that had almost exhausted its own energy resources and never really tried very hard to develop new ones.

According to the report, the amount of concentrated natural gas found to be on Mars was enough to fuel the Earth for several decades.

Making whoever owned that gas the de facto ruler of the global economy for the foreseeable future.

As you'd expect, the news kicked up a ruckus here on Earth, as nations argued over who owned this, the most valuable of all resources.

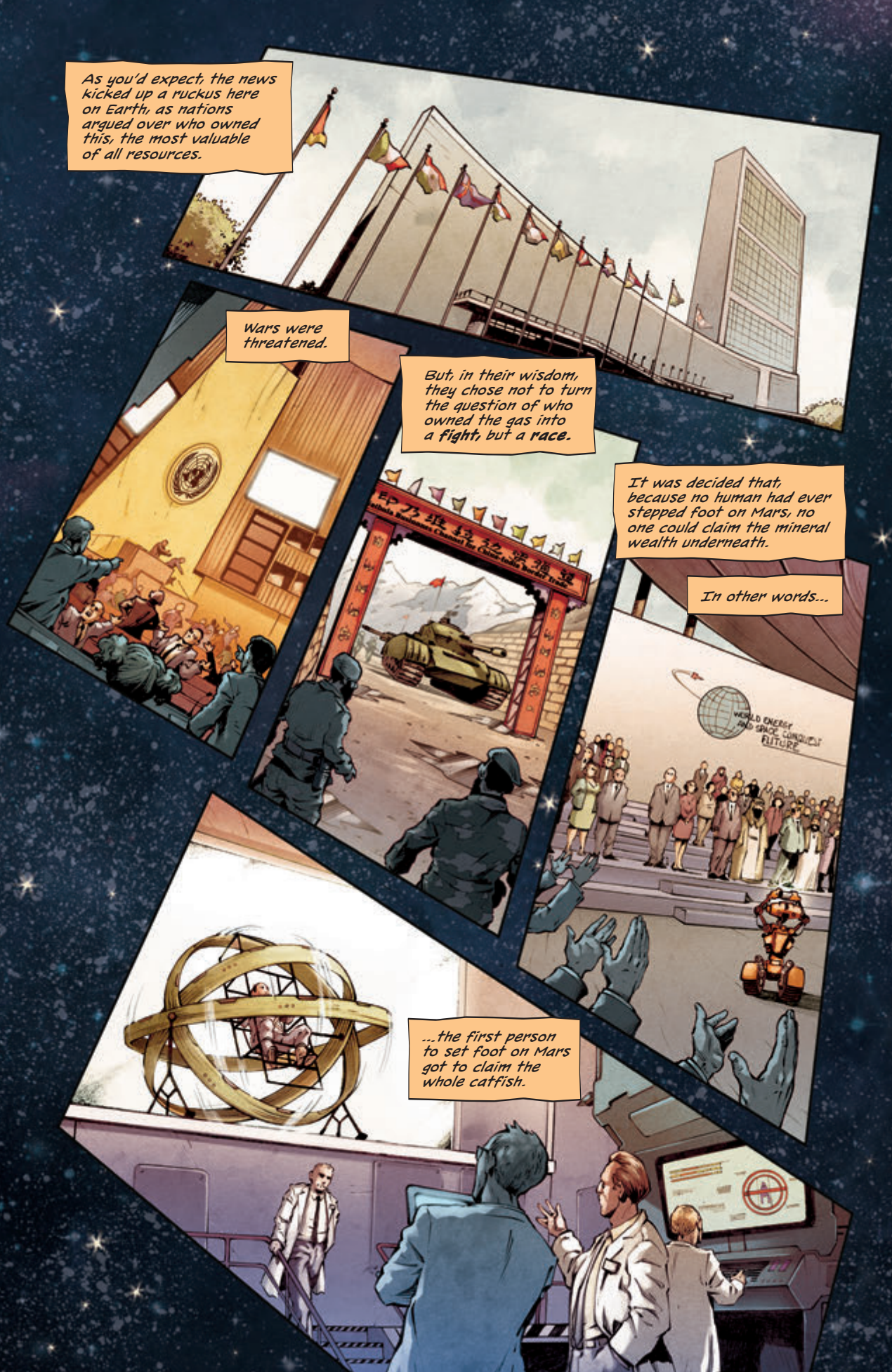
Wars were threatened.

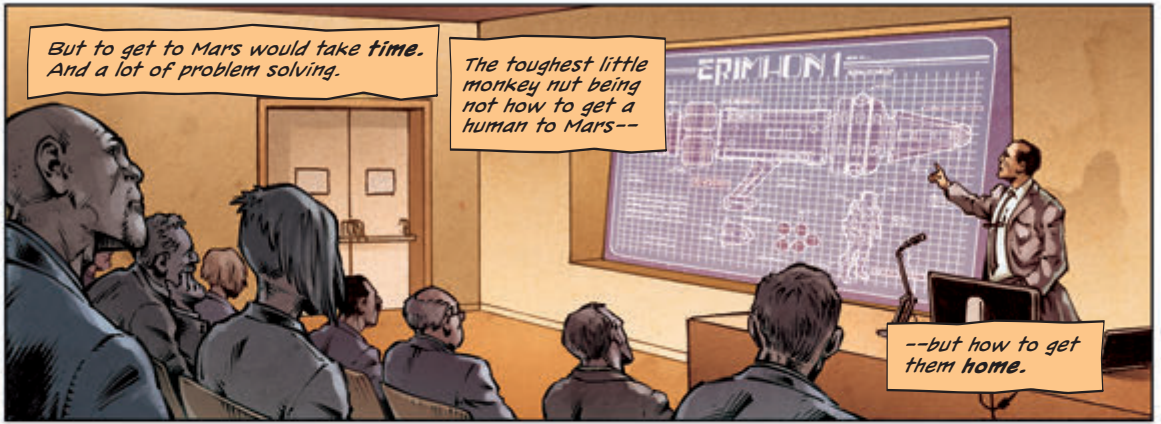
But, in their wisdom, they chose not to turn the question of who owned the gas into a fight, but a race.

It was decided that because no human had ever stepped foot on Mars, no one could claim the mineral wealth underneath.

In other words...

...the first person to set foot on Mars got to claim the whole catfish.

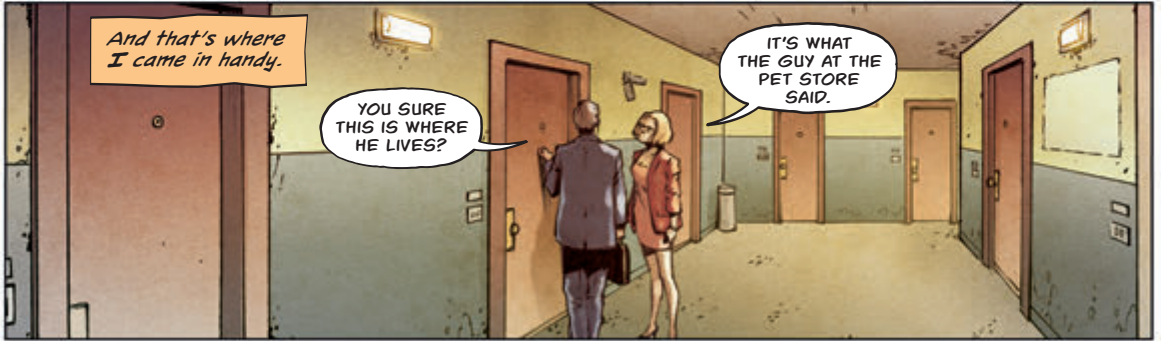




*But to get to Mars would take time.
And a lot of problem solving.*

*The toughest little
monkey nut being
not how to get a
human to Mars--*

*--but how to get
them home.*



*And that's where
I came in handy.*

YOU SURE
THIS IS WHERE
HE LIVES?

IT'S WHAT
THE GUY AT THE
PET STORE
SAID.



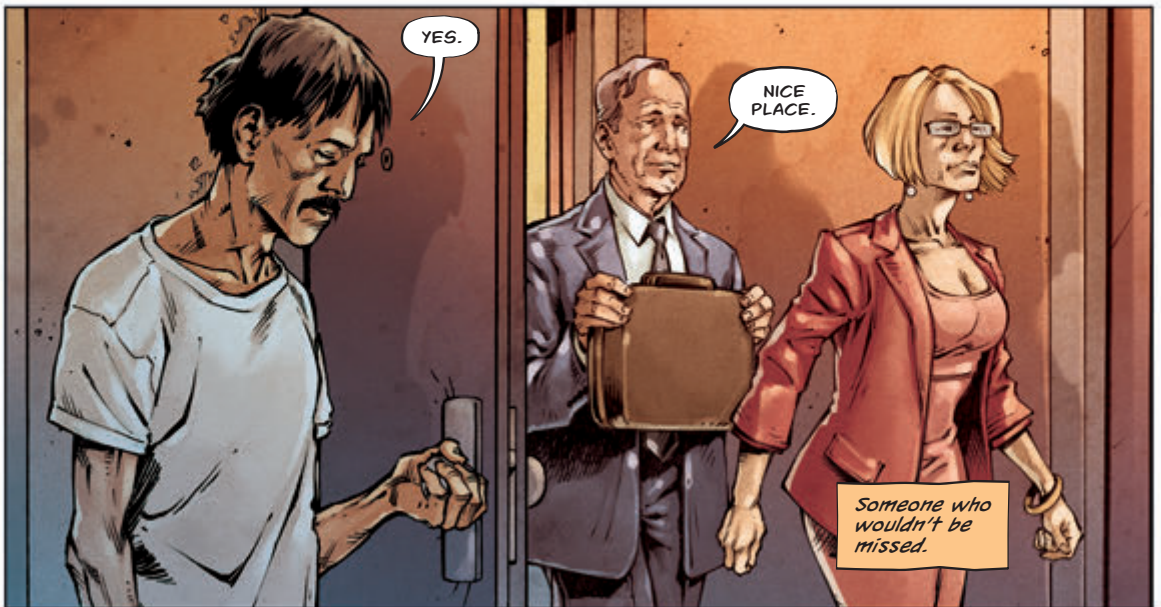
*It was the first time in
many years anyone
actually needed me.*

ROY? ROY
LIVINGSTON?

YES?

MAY WE COME
IN?

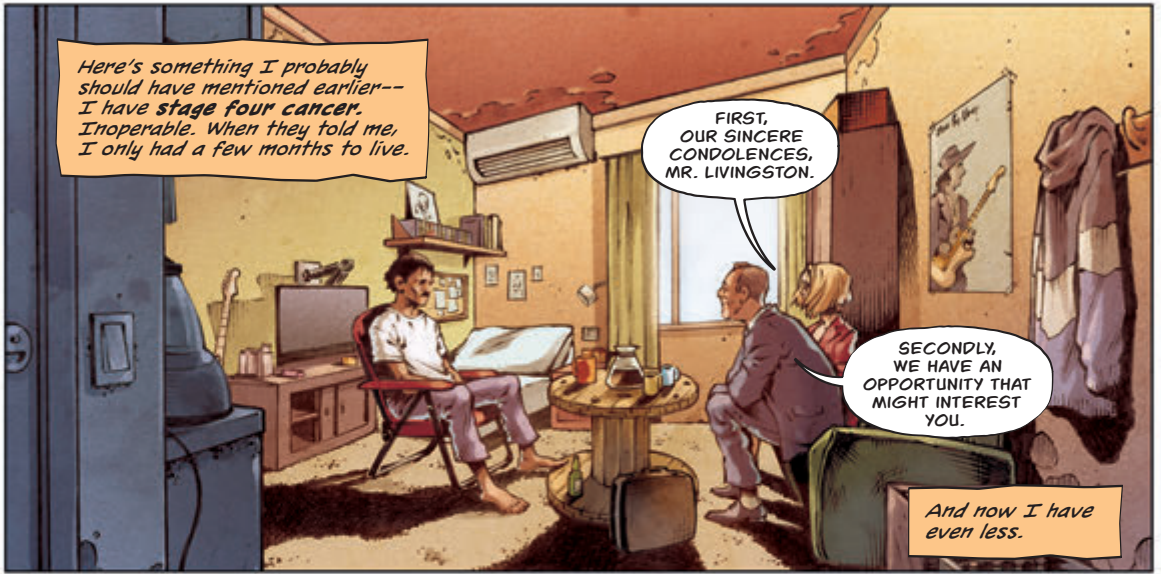
*Someone they could
send to Mars without
having to bring
them back.*



YES.

NICE
PLACE.

*Someone who
wouldn't be
missed.*

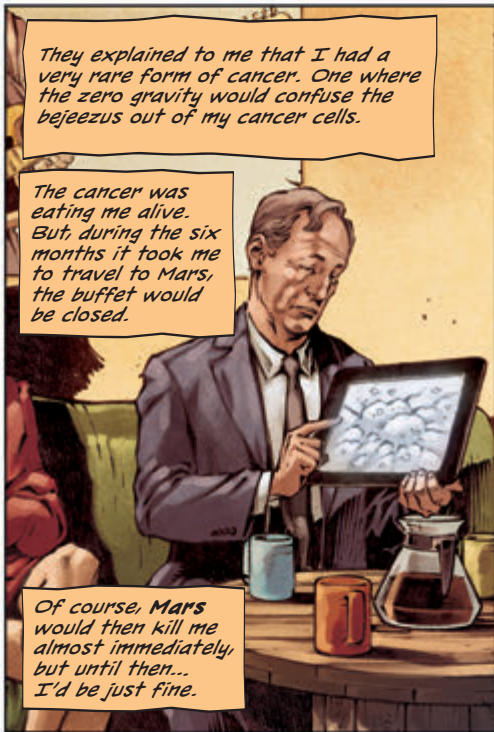


Here's something I probably should have mentioned earlier-- I have **stage four cancer**. Inoperable. When they told me, I only had a few months to live.

FIRST, OUR SINCERE CONDOLENCES, MR. LIVINGSTON.

SECONDLY, WE HAVE AN OPPORTUNITY THAT MIGHT INTEREST YOU.

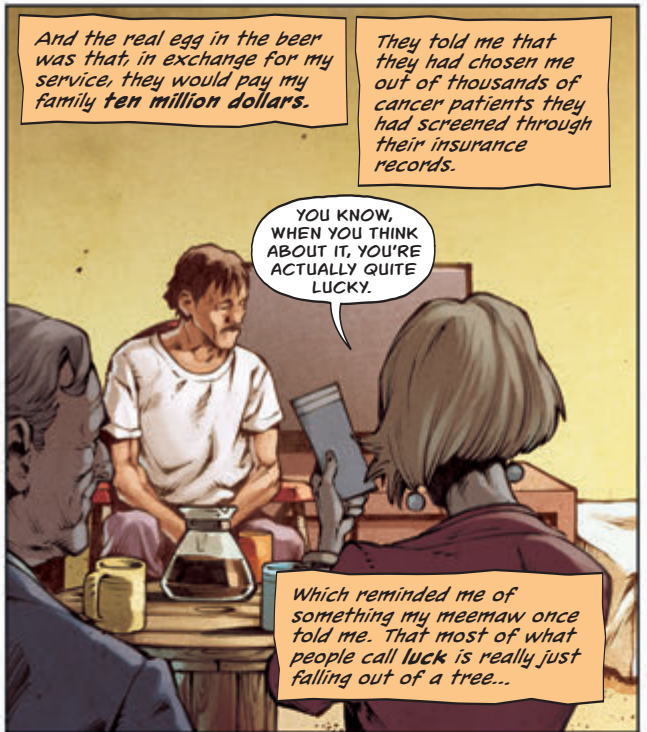
And now I have even less.



They explained to me that I had a very rare form of cancer. One where the zero gravity would confuse the bejeezus out of my cancer cells.

The cancer was eating me alive. But, during the six months it took me to travel to Mars, the buffet would be closed.

Of course, Mars would then kill me almost immediately, but until then... I'd be just fine.

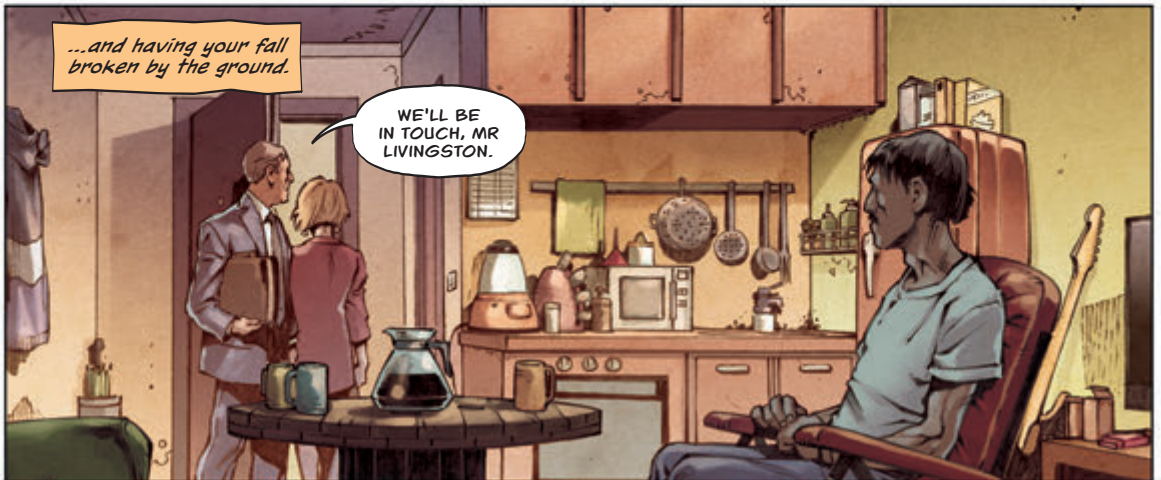


And the real egg in the beer was that, in exchange for my service, they would pay my family ten million dollars.

They told me that they had chosen me out of thousands of cancer patients they had screened through their insurance records.

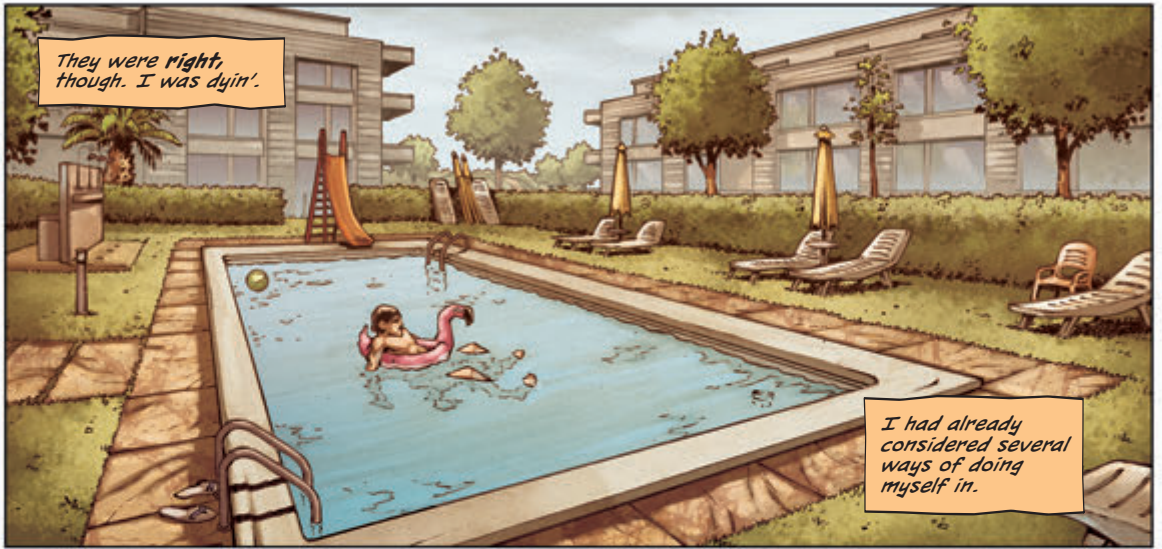
YOU KNOW, WHEN YOU THINK ABOUT IT, YOU'RE ACTUALLY QUITE LUCKY.

Which reminded me of something my meemaw once told me. That most of what people call luck is really just falling out of a tree...



...and having your fall broken by the ground.

WE'LL BE IN TOUCH, MR LIVINGSTON.



They were right, though. I was dyin'.

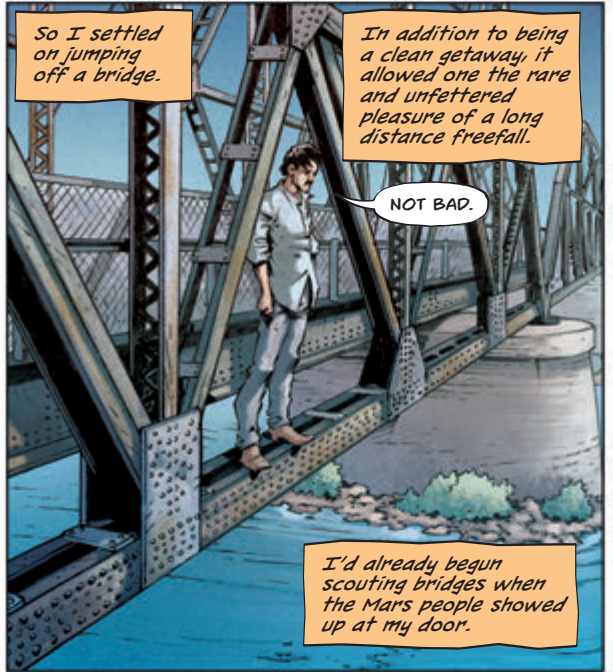
I had already considered several ways of doing myself in.



A gunshot to the head seemed easiest, but also the messiest. So I briefly considered the gentler horrors of an amateur hanging.

WHAT IN BLUE KENTUCKY?!

But I just couldn't do that to Gary. He'd let me live in that apartment for three years without ever once raising my rent.



So I settled on jumping off a bridge.

In addition to being a clean getaway, it allowed one the rare and unfettered pleasure of a long distance freefall.

NOT BAD.

I'd already begun scouting bridges when the Mars people showed up at my door.

When the ten million dollars made my decision for me.



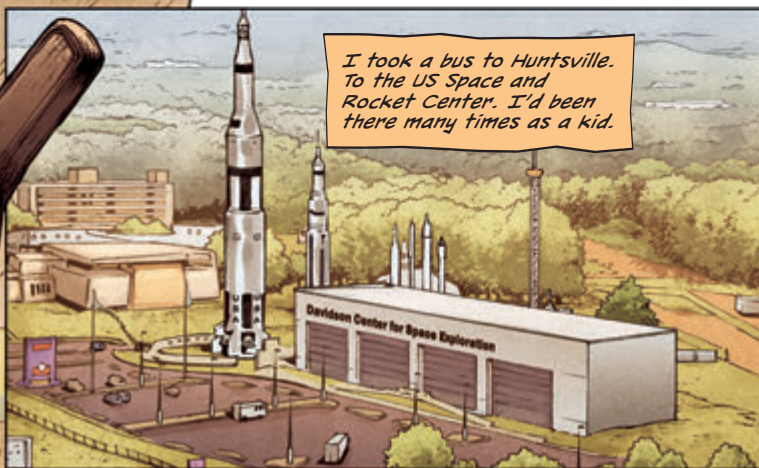
So I packed the few belongings that mattered to me--



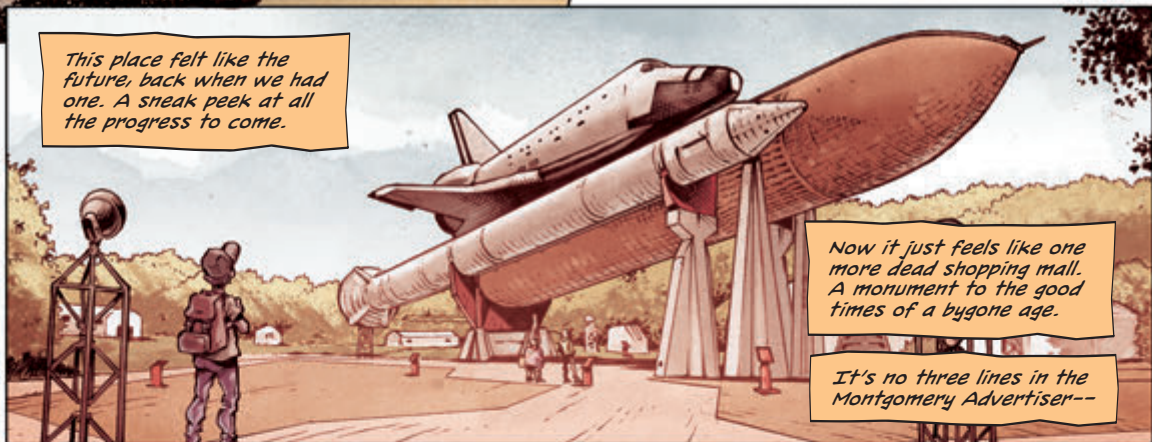
--and left my life behind.



I took a bus to Huntsville. To the US Space and Rocket Center. I'd been there many times as a kid.



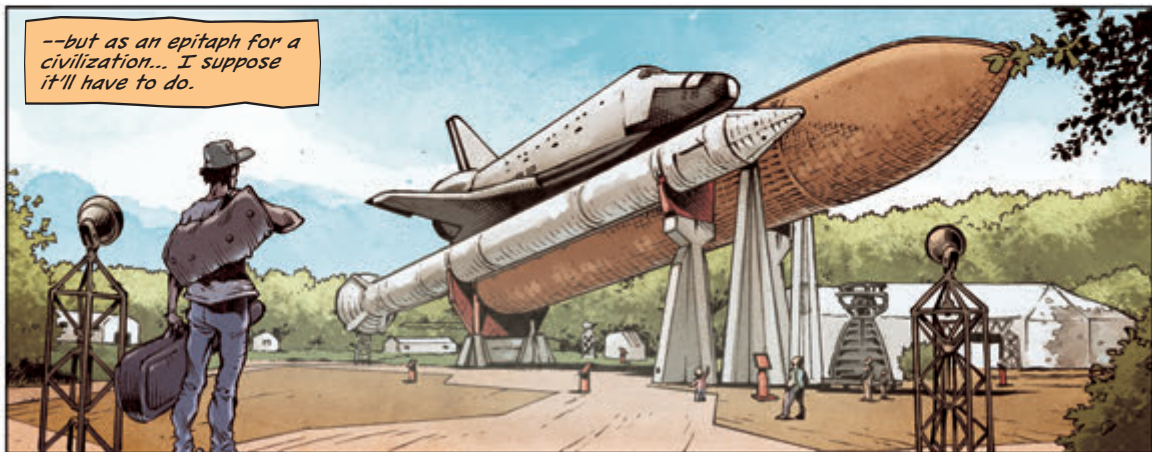
This place felt like the future, back when we had one. A sneak peek at all the progress to come.



Now it just feels like one more dead shopping mall. A monument to the good times of a bygone age.

It's no three lines in the Montgomery Advertiser--

--but as an epitaph for a civilization... I suppose it'll have to do.



I imagined they had approached me on behalf of the United States government, but as I would later learn, this was not so.

THIS IS MY BOSS, JEFFREY PHIPPS.

GUITAR PLAYER, HUH?

They had just rented an office at the Rocket Center.

Their idea, to send a terminally ill man to Mars, was apparently a trump card they needed to protect at all costs.

AS YOU CAN SEE, THIS CONTRACT CONTAINS A NON-DISCLOSURE AGREEMENT.

UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCES ARE YOU TO SHARE WHAT YOU ARE DOING WITH **ANYONE**. NOT EVEN YOUR FAMILY.

IN FACT, AFTER YOU SIGN THIS... YOU WILL BE IN OUR CUSTODY AT ALL TIMES.

That last part was easier to agree to than I imagined it would be.

HERE.

I mean, who did I have to tell?

I hadn't even told anyone that I was sick.

Besides, they would just try to talk me out of it. Good-byes are overrated. Best just to be gone.

YOU WON'T REGRET THIS, ROY.

Is it still called regret when you couldn't have done anything differently?

First, they sent me to Dr. Rubens for a physical.

YOU TWO HAVE FUN NOW!

Though, I don't see why. We both knew I was dying.

And, I mean, wasn't that the whole point?

Wasn't that why I was here?

YEP. YOU ARE SHOWING MASSIVE CELL DEGENERATION.

YOU MAY BE THE ONLY PERSON ON EARTH WHOSE LIFE EXPECTANCY IS IMPROVED BY A TRIP TO MARS.

JUST LUCKY, I SUPPOSE.

To have my fall broken by the floor?

ALMOST DONE HERE, MR. PHIPPS.

COOL. COOL. HEY, JOHNNY GUITAR. GOT YOU A PRESENT.

THAT HAT BELONGED TO THE LATE GREAT STEVIE RAY VAUGHN.

I'm not sure why anyone would assume I'd want this.

But I have to admit... it's the best present anyone ever gave me.