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Willy Wonka and the Stardust

by Pia de Jong

Our trip in the darkness to the top of a hill in Silicon Valley ends in front of a barred gate. We leave our car and climb into a golf cart with a cheerful driver in a spotless white uniform behind the wheel. Beyond the gate are trees displayed by purple floodlights. Fountains are spraying pink water. Carp glide in iridescent ponds. I imagine myself in a high-tech version of Charlie and the Chocolate Factory.

Before I can say that I'm chilly, the driver hands me a blanket. Around us are identical golf carts with drivers and guests with blankets over their knees. We all received the golden invitation from this modern Willy Wonka.

At the top of the hill we are dropped off in front of our host's house, a palace lit in all colors of the rainbow, one of the most expensive homes in the richest neighborhood in the world. But before we can tour it all, we are led through marble corridors to a green, octagonal room. On the walls are projected animations of galaxies and gas clouds. The ceiling displays a dizzying view of the Milky Way. I can imagine myself in a spaceship that buzzes through the intergalactic space.

When the guests are inside, all in evening clothes according to the strict dress code, a small man in a turtleneck joins the company. He is our host, the Russian investor and philanthropist Yuri Milner. He is the founder and co-funder of the Breakthrough Prizes, the \$3 million awards that are the largest scientific prizes in the world. Tonight, though, he starts talking about his favorite project, Breakthrough Starshot — the plan to shoot thousands of tiny space probes to the nearest star, Alpha Centauri, about four light years away from us. An eco-planet that is very similar to the earth was recently found nearby. If the mini-space sailboats travel at 15 percent of the speed of light, about 150 million kilometers per hour, they will tell us in 30 years what life is like there.

There are people who think that climate change is nonsense. Not so Milner and his companions. They are convinced that it will soon be over for our planet. You better have a plan. At the launch of this project, Stephen Hawking announced with his sonorous computer voice: "We have given our planet the disaster of climate change: rising temperatures, reduction of polar ice caps, deforestation, and decimation of animal species ... There is no room left, and we can only go to other worlds. It is time to explore other solar systems."

Milner is a dreamer, a visionary, at least a Willy Wonka with many billions of dollars. He is convinced that man must leave the earth and live on other planets. He cannot wait for that to happen.

I see him walk outside. In the distance, the lights of San Francisco Bay are twinkling. Above is the starry sky. He climbs a white staircase up to a lookout point. There he goes behind a telescope. Somewhere light years away, a star is waiting for him. Then he will live there, undoubtedly in all luxury. He may then stare at the earth through his telescope. A small planet that has come on hard times.

But who will give this little prince a blanket when he is cold?

Pia de Jong is a Dutch writer who lives in Princeton. Her memoir, "Saving Charlotte," was published by W.W. Norton in 2017. She can be contacted at pdejong@ias.edu. Richard K. Rein is on assignment.

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