

PLANET STORIES



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Dwellers In Silence

By RAY BRADBURY



The fire grew in the sky.

A shattered Earth suddenly remembered poor Hathaway, marooned on Mars by the mad rush homeward, all alone. But—was he alone?

WHEN THE WIND CAME through the sky, he and his small family would sit in the stone hut and warm their hands over a small fire. The wind would stir the canal waters and almost blow the stars out of the sky, but Mr. Hathaway would sit contented and talk to his wife and his wife would talk back, and he would talk to his two daughters and his son about the old days on Earth, and they would all reply neatly.

It was the twentieth year after the

Great War. Mars was a tomb planet. Whether or not Earth was the same was a matter for much silent debate for himself, or his family, on the long Martian nights. Then the dust storms came over the low hexagonal tomb buildings, whining past the great ancient gargoyles on the iron mountains, blowing between the last standing pillars of an old city, and tearing away the plastic walls of a newer, American-built city that was melting away into the sand, desolated.

Hathaway rose from the family circle from time to time and went out into the suddenly clear weather following the storm to look up and see Earth burning green there on the windy sky. He put his hand up for a moment, as one might reach up a hand to adjust a dimly burning light globe in the ceiling of a dark room. Then he said something, quietly, and looked across the long dead sea bottom not moving. Not another living thing on this entire planet, he thought just myself. And then. He looked back inside the stone hut.

What was happening on Earth now? He stared up until his eyes watered with strain. Had the atom bomb eaten everybody there? He had seen no visible sign of change in the aspect of Earth through his thirty-inch telescope. Well, he thought, he was good for another twenty years if he was careful. Someone might come. Either across the dead seas, or out of space in a rocket, on a little thread of red flame.

He peered into the hut. "I think I'll take a walk," he said.

His wife did not turn.

"I said," he cried, "I think I'll take a walk."

"All right," his wife said.

"That's better," said Hathaway.

He turned and walked quietly down through a series of low ruins. "Made in New York," he read from a piece of metal as he passed. "This will all be gone long before the old Martian ruins." He waved at a city ten thousand years old, intact, that lay on the rim of the dead sea twenty miles over, in a mist. "Did anything like that ever happen on Earth? Well, the Egyptians, almost. They came nearest, because they took their time.

He quieted. He came to the Martian graveyard. It was a series of small hexagonal stones and buildings set in the top of a hill. The drifting sand had never covered them because the hill was too high and swept by the winds.

THERE were four graves with crude wooden crosses on them, and names. He stood for a moment looking down at them. He did nothing with his eyes, they

would do nothing. They had dried up long ago.

"Do you forgive me for what I have done?" he asked of the crosses. "I had to do it. I was so lonely," he said. "You do forgive me, don't you? You don't mind. No. No, you don't mind. I'm glad."

He walked back down the hill, looking at the sea bottom. If only something would come; even a monster of some sort would be welcome. Something to run from, perhaps, would be a change.

He reached the stone hut and, once more, just before going inside, he shaded his eyes with his hands, searching the sky.

"You keep waiting and waiting and looking and looking," he said. "And one night, perhaps——"

There was a tiny point of red flame on the sky.

"And you keep looking," he said. "And you look," he said. He stopped. He looked down at the ground. Then he stepped away from the light of the stone hut. "——and you look *again*," he whispered.

The tiny flame point was still there.

"It wasn't there last night," he murmured.

"It is red," he said, finally.

And then his eyes were wet with pain.

"It is a rocket," he said. "My telescope." He stumbled and fell, picked himself up, got around back of the hut and swiveled the telescope so that it pointed into the sky.

A minute later, after a long wild staring, he appeared in the low doorway and he came in to sit by the fireplace. He looked at the fire. The wife and the two daughters and the son looked at him. Finally he said, "I have good news. A ship is coming to take us all home. It will be here in the early morning."

He put his hands down and put his head into his hands and began to cry, gently, with long waiting pain, like a child.

He burned what was left of New York that morning at three.

He took a torch and moved into the plastic and wood city and tapped the walls here or there and the city went up in great tosses of heat and light. When he

walked back out of the city it was a square mile of illumination, big enough to be seen out in space. It would beckon the rocket down to him and his family.

His heart beating rapidly, he returned to the hut where the family waited. "See," he said. He held up an old bottle into the light. "Wine I saved. Just for tonight. I knew that perhaps one day someone would come. And so I saved this. I hid it in the storage shed. We'll have a drink and celebrate!" And he popped the cork out and poured five glasses full. His wife and the three children picked up their glasses, smiling.

"It's been a long time," he said gravely, looking into his drink. "Remember the day the War broke? How long ago? Nineteen years and seven months, exactly. And all the rockets were called home from Mars, and you and I and the children were out in the mountains, doing archaeological work, doing research on the ancient methods of surgery used by the Martians; it helped me a lot in my own work. And we ran our horses, almost killing them, but got back here to the city a week late. Everyone was gone. America had been destroyed; every rocket had left without waiting for stragglers, remember, remember? And, it turned out, we were the only ones left? Lord, Lord, how the years pass. It seems only a day, now. I couldn't have stood it without you here, all of you. I couldn't have stood it at all. I'd have killed myself without you. But, with you, it was worth waiting. Here's to us, then." He raised his drink. "And to our long wait together. And here's to them." He gestured at the sky. "May they land safely and—" A troubled frown.

"—may they be friends to us when they land. He drank his wine.

The wife and the three children raised their glasses to their lips.

The wine ran down over the chins of all four of them.

BY morning the city was blowing in great black soft flakes across the sea bottom. The fire was exhausted, but it had served its purpose; the red spot on the sky enlarged and came down.

From the stone hut came the rich brown smell of baked ginger bread. His wife stood over the table, setting down the hot pans of new bread as Hathaway entered. The two daughters were gently sweeping the bare stone floor with stiff brooms, and the son was polishing the silverware. "We will have a breakfast for them, for everyone in the crew," said Hathaway. "You must all put on your best clothes."

He walked across his land to the vast metal storage shed. Inside, was the cold storage unit and power plant he had repaired and restored with his efficient, small, nervous fingers over the years, just as he had repaired clocks and telephones and spool recorders in his spare time. The shed was full of things he had built, some of them senseless mechanisms the functions of which were a mystery even to himself now as he looked at them. There were jars of liquid and jars of gelatin and other substances.

One day, just for a joke, he had laid telephone wires all the way from the hut to the dead city twenty miles away. He had installed a phone in an empty Martian tower room of the highest cupola in the city and come back, whistling quietly to a freshly fixed dinner of cold storage turnips and filet mignon. Many nights, for the hell of it, he dialed the dead city number, which, with a shine to his eye, he had fixed at 00-000-00.

It would have been interesting if someone had answered.

From the storage deep freeze compartment he now carried frozen cartons of beans and strawberries, twenty years old. Lazarus, come forth, he thought, as he pulled out a cool chicken.

Then the Rocket landed.

Hathaway ran down the hill like a young boy. He had to stop once, because of a sudden sickening pain in his chest. He sat on a rock and breathed out and in. Then he got up and ran all the rest of the way.

"Hello, hello!"

He stood in the hot air of summer that had been caused by the fiery heat of the rocket exhausts. A vent opened in the side of the rocket and a man stood in the round entrance looking down.

"You're an American!" the man shouted.

"So are you; hello!" cried Hathaway, pink-cheeked.

"Well, I'll be damned!" The man leaped down and walked across the sand swiftly, his hand out. "We expected nothing, and here you are!"

Their hands clasped and held, they looked into each other's faces.

"Why, you're Hathaway, I know you." The man was amazed. His grip tightened. His mouth was open and shut and open again, speechless. "Hathaway! When I was a kid, twenty years ago, I saw you in the television set at school. I watched you perform a difficult surgery for a cerebral tumor!"

"Thank you, thank you, I had almost forgotten."

The man from the rocket looked beyond Hathaway. "You're alone? Your wife, I remember her. And there were children—"

"My son, my daughters, my wife, they are at our hut."

"Good, good, splendid. You look fine, sir."

"Cold storage and a lot of work. I've kept myself busy. I've had time for my hobbies. I was always interested in machines as they relate to physiology and physiology as it relates to machines, you know. But, your name?"

"Captain Ernest Parsons of Joliet, Illinois, sir."

"Captain Parsons." They were not done with the handshaking yet. "How many in your crew?" "Twenty, sir." "Fine, there's a good breakfast waiting all of you up the hill. "Will you come?" "Will we come?" asked the captain. He turned and looked at the rocket. "Abandon ship!" And it was done in half a minute.

THEY walked up the hill together, Hathaway and the captain, the men following dutifully and talkatively behind, taking in deep breaths of the thin Martian air. The sun rose and it was a good day. It would be warm later. Smoke lifted from the stone hut.

"I'm sorry." Hathaway sat down, his hand on his chest. "All the excitement.

I'll have to wait." He felt his heart moving under his hand. He counted the beats. It was not good.

"We have a doctor with us," said Parsons. "I beg your pardon, sir, I know you are one, but we'd best check you with our own, and if you need anything —"

"I'll be all right, the excitement, the waiting." Hathaway could hardly breathe. His face was pale and wet, his lips blue. His hand trembled. "You know," he said, as the doctor came up and put a stethoscope against him, "it's as if I've kept alive just for this day, all those years, and now that you're here and I know Earth is still alive—well, I can lie down and quit."

"You can't do that, sir, there's the breakfast to eat," insisted Parsons, gently. "A fine host that would be."

"Here we are," and the doctor gave Hathaway a small yellow pellet. "I suggest this. You're badly overexcited. It might be a good idea if we carried you the rest of the way."

"Nonsense, just let me sit here a moment. It's good to see you all. It's good to hear your names. What were they again? You introduced me, but when you're excited you don't see or hear or do any thing right. Parsons and Glasgow and Williamson and Hamilton and Spaulding and Ellison and Smith and someone named Brackett and that's all I remember." He smiled weakly, his eyes squinted. "See how good I am?"

"Splendid. Did the pellet work?"

"Well enough. Here we go."

They walked on up the hill.

"Alice, come out and see who we have here," Hathaway called into the hut. The men of the rocket stood waiting and smiling. Hathaway frowned slightly and bent into the doorway once more. "Alice, did you hear, come out now."

His wife appeared in the doorway. A moment later the two daughters, tall and gracious, came out, followed by an even taller son.

"Captain Parsons, my wife. Alice, this is Captain Parsons."

"Mrs. Hathaway, I remember you from a long time ago."

"Captain Parsons." She shook his

hand and turned, still holding his hand. "My daughters, Marguerite and Susan. My son, John. Captain Parsons."

Hathaway stood smiling as hands were shaken all around.

"It's like coming home," said Parsons, simply.

"It's like home having you," said the wife.

Parson sniffed the air. "Is that *gingerbread*?"

"Will you have a piece?"

Everybody laughed. And while folding tables were carried down and set up by the wide canal and hot foods were brought out and set down and plates were placed about with fine silverware and damask napkins, Captain Parsons looked first at Mrs. Hathaway and then at her son and then at her two tall, gracious daughters. He sat upon a folding chair which the son brought him and said, "How old are you, son?"

The son replied, "Twenty-three."

Parsons said nothing else. He looked down at his silverware but his face grew pale and sickly. Hathaway was helping his wife bring out more tureens of food. The man next to Parsons said, "Sir, that can't be right."

"What's that, Williamson? . . . asked Parsons.

"I'm thirty-eight myself, sir. I was in school the same time as young John Hathaway there, twenty years ago. And he says he's only twenty-three. And, by God, he only *looks* twenty-three. But that can't be right. He should be thirty-eight."

"Yes, I know," said Parsons, quietly.

"What does it mean, sir?"

"I don't know."

"You don't look well, sir."

"I'm not feeling very well. Will you do me a favor?"

"Yes, sir."

"I want you to run a little errand for me. I'll tell you where to go and what to check. Late in the breakfast, slip away. It should take you only five minutes. The place is not far from here."

"Yes, sir."

"Here, what are you two talking so seriously about?" Mrs. Hathaway ladled

quick ladles of soup into their bowls. "Smile now, we're all together, the trip's over, and it's like home!"

"Yes, ma'm," said Captain Parsons. "You look very young, Mrs. Hathaway, I hope you don't mind my saying."

"Isn't that like a man?" And she gave him an extra ladle of soup.

PARSONS watched her move away. Her face was filled with warmth, it was smooth and unwrinkled. She moved around the tables and placed things neatly and laughed at every joke. She stopped never once to sit and take her breath. And the son and daughters were brilliant and witty as their father, telling of the long years and their quiet life.

The breakfast went through its courses. Midway, Williamson slipped quietly off and walked down the hill. "Where is he going so suddenly?" inquired Hathaway. "He'll be right back. There's some stuff he's to check in the rocket," explained Parsons. "But, as I was saying, sir, there wasn't much left of America. The grass country towns, was about all. New York was a wreck. It took twenty years to get things back on an even keel, what with the radio-activity and all. Europe wasn't any better off. But we finally have a World Government."

Parsons talked automatically, reading it off from memory, not listening to himself, thinking only of Williamson going down the hill and coming back to tell what he had found. "Ours is the only rocket now available," said Parsons. "There'll be more in about four years. We're here on a preliminary survey to see what's left of our colonies. Not much here. Perhaps more over at New Chicago. We'll check there this afternoon.

"Thanks," he said, as Marguerite Hathaway filled his water glass. He touched her hand, suddenly. She did not even mind it. Her hand was warm. "Incredible," thought Parsons.

Hathaway, at the head of the table, paused long enough to press his hand to his chest. Then he went on, listening to the talk, looking now and then, with concern, at Parsons, who did not seem to be enjoying his meal.

Williamson returned up the hill, in a great hurry.

Williamson sat down beside Parsons. He was agitated and his cheeks were white. He could not keep his mind on his food, he kept picking at it until the captain whispered aside to him, "Well?"

"I found it, sir, what you sent me to find, sir."

"And?"

"I went down the hill and up that other hill until I came to the graveyard, as you directed." Williamson kept his eyes on the party. People were laughing. The daughters were smiling gravely and blinking and the son was telling a joke. Hathaway was smoking a cigarette, his first really fresh one in years. "And," said Williamson, "I went into the graveyard."

"The four crosses were there?" asked Parsons.

"The four crosses were there, sir. The names were still on them. I wrote them down to be sure." He produced a white paper and read from it. "Alice Hathaway, Marguerite, Susan and John Hathaway. All four died of the plague in July, 1997."

"Thank you, Williamson," said Parsons. He closed his eyes.

"Twenty years ago, sir," said Williamson, his hands trembling. He was afraid to look up at the people at the table.

"Yes, twenty years ago," said Parsons.

"Then, who are *these*?" And Williamson wide-eyed, nodded at the two daughters and the son and the wife of Hathaway, the last man on Mars.

"I don't know, Williamson."

"What are you going to do, sir?"

"I don't know that either," he said, slowly.

"Will we tell the other men?"

"No, not yet. Later. Go on with your food as if nothing had happened."

"I'm not very hungry now, sir."

They both began on their dessert.

THE meal ended with wine brought from the rocket. Hathaway rose to his feet, holding his glass. "A toast to all of you, it is good to be with friends again." He moved his wine glass ever so little in the air. "And to my wife, and my children, without whom I could not

have survived alone. It is only through their kindness in caring for me, that I have lived on, waiting for your arrival. Else, years ago, I would have put a bullet in my head." He moved his glass now to his wife, now to his children, who looked back self-consciously, lowering their eyes at last as everyone drank.

Parsons' eyelids were flickering nervously. His hands were moving uneasily on his lap.

Hathaway drank down his wine and fell forward onto the table and then slipped toward the ground. He did not cry out. Several of the men caught and eased him to the ground where the doctor felt of his chest, listened, and remained there, listening, until Parsons arrived with Williamson.

The doctor looked up and shook his head. Parsons knelt and took the old man's hand. "Parsons, is that you?" Hathaway's voice was barely audible. Parsons nodded. "I'm sorry," said Hathaway, gently grieved. "I had to spoil the breakfast." "Never your mind," said Parsons. "Say goodbye to Alice and the children for me," said the old man. "They're right here," said Parsons. "Just a moment, I'll call them." "No, no, don't; they wouldn't understand, I wouldn't want them to understand, no, don't," whispered Hathaway. Parsons did not move.

A moment later old Dr. Hathaway was dead.

Parsons waited for a long time. Then he arose and walked away from the small stunned group around Hathaway. He went to Alice Hathaway and looked into her face and said, "Do you know what has just happened?"

"It's something about my husband," she said.

"He's just passed away; his heart," said Parsons, watching her.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"He didn't want us to feel badly, he told us it would happen one day, and he didn't want us to cry. He didn't teach us how, you know. He didn't want us to know, he said it was the worst thing that could happen to a man to know how to be lonely and to know how to be sad and then cry.

So we're not to know what death is or what crying is or being sad."

Parsons looked off at the mountains. "Perhaps it's just as well." He glanced at her hands, the soft warm hands and the fine manicured nails and the tapered wrists. And he looked at the slender smooth white neck and the intelligent eyes. "I know all about you," he said, finally.

"But the others don't." She was confident of that.

"No, you're so perfect they haven't guessed. Mr. Hathaway did a fine job on you and your children."

"He would have liked to hear you say that. He was so very proud of us. After a while he even forgot that he had made us. At the end he loved and took us as his real wife and children. And, in a way, we are."

"You gave him a great deal of comfort," said Parsons.

"Yes, over the years we sat and talked and talked. He so much loved to talk. He liked the stone hut and the open fire. We could have lived in a regular house in the town, but he liked it up here, where he could be primitive if he liked, or modern if he liked. He told me all about his laboratory and the things he did in it. Once he wired the entire dead American town below with sound speakers and when he pressed a button the town lit up and made noises as if ten thousand people lived in it. There were airplane noises and car noises and the sounds of people talking. He would sit and light a cigar and talk to us and the sounds would come up from the town and once in awhile the phone would ring and a recorded voice, Mr. Hathaway himself, would ask Mr. Hathaway scientific and surgical questions and he would answer them, and then I'd make strawberry biscuits. Mr. Hathaway took a transcription of his voice down into town each day, put it in a automatic telephone that called us every night. And with the phone ringing and us here and the sounds of the town and the cigar, I'm sure Mr. Hathaway was quite happy."

"Twenty years, the five of you living here," said Parsons.

"There's only one thing he couldn't make us do," she said. "And that was grow old. He got older every day but we stayed the same. I guess he didn't mind. I guess he wanted us that way."

"We'll bury him down in the yard where the other four crosses are. I think he would like that."

She put her hand on his wrist, lightly. "I'm sure he would."

ORDERS were given. The wife and the three children followed the little procession down the hill. Two men carried Hathaway on a covered stretcher. They passed the stone hut and the storage shed where Hathaway twenty years ago had begun his work. Parsons stepped from the procession a moment to stand within the doorway of the workshop.

How would it be to be alone on a planet with a wife and three children and then to have them die of the plague, leaving you alone in a world with nothing on it but wind and silence? What would you do? You would bury them with crosses in the graveyard and then come back up to your workshop and with all the power of mind and memory and accuracy of finger and genius, put together, bit by bit, all those things that were wife, son and daughter. With an entire American city below from which to draw needed supplies, a brilliant man might do anything.

Parsons returned to the procession. The sound of their footsteps was muffled in the sand. At the graveyard, as they turned in, two men were already spading out the earth.

The men came back to the rocket in the late afternoon. They stood in a circle around the captain.

Williamson nodded up at the stone hut. "What are you going to do about *them*?"

"I don't know," said the captain.

"Are you going to turn them off?"

"Off? The captain looked faintly surprised. "It never entered my mind."

"You're not going to take them back with us?"

"No, we haven't space for them."

"You mean you're going to leave them here, like that, like they are? It's sort of ghastly, the thought of them being here."

The captain gave Smith a gun. "If you can do something about this, you're a better man than I."

Five minutes later, Williamson returned from the hut, sweating. He handed the gun back. "Here. Take it. I know what you mean, now. I went in with the gun. One of the daughters looked up at me. She smiled. So did the others. The wife said something about sitting down for a cup of tea. That did it. God, God, it would be murder." He shook his head.

Parsons nodded. "After all the work he put in on them, it would be killing. There'll never be anything as fine as them again, ever. They're built to last; ten, fifty, two hundred years. Yes, they've as much right to live as you or I or any of us." He knocked out his pipe. "Well, get aboard. We're taking off. This city's done for, we'll not be using it."

It was getting late in the day. The wind was rising. All the men were aboard. The captain hesitated. Williamson looked at him and said, "Don't tell me you're going back to say—good-bye—to them?"

The captain looked at Williamson coldly. "None of your damn business."

Parsons walked up toward the hut through the darkening wind. The men in

the rocket saw his shadow lingering inside the stone hut door. They saw a woman's shadow. They saw the captain put out his hand to shake her hand.

A minute later, he came running back to the rocket.

The rocket went up into the sky. It was only a red point, going away.

AND NOW, on nights when the wind comes over the dead sea bottoms and through the hexagonal graveyard where there are four old crosses and one new fresh one, there is a light burning in the low stone hut on the edge of the burned New New York, and in that hut, as the wind roars by and the dust sifts down and the cold stars burn, are four figures, a woman, two daughters and a son, tending a low fire for no reason and talking and laughing, and this goes on night after night for every year and every year, and some nights, for no reason, the wife comes out and looks at the sky, her hands up, for a long moment, looking at the green burning of Earth, not knowing why she looks, knowing nothing, and then she goes back in and throws a stick on the fire and the wind comes up and the dead sea goes on being dead.
