

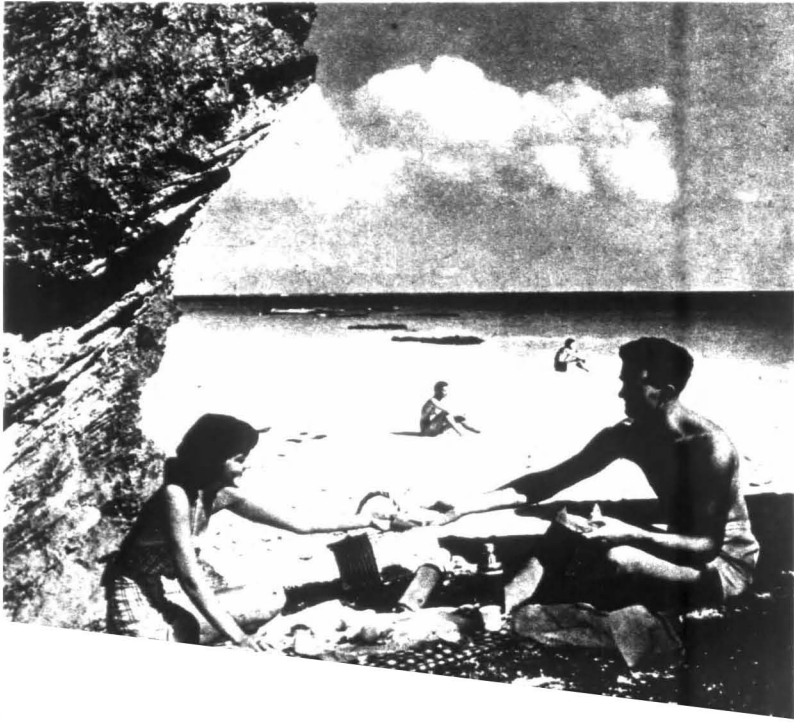
# Today...

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# Today's

C O N T E N T S

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# The Wilderness

By Ray Bradbury

THE cold stars burned through the walls of the room, watching them. Billions of lonely stars moved in the night across the sky, and the two women could feel the stars move without looking up, and the room in which they stood trembled suddenly and seemed suspended in a whirling black space where great comet winds rushed by, taking your breath away.

"Are you afraid?"

"A little."

Janice packed her suitcase, blindly. It was a warm June evening in the year 1965, and the two women had been packing, each at the other's empty house, through the strange, bright day with never a moment when they ceased talking, wondering, and holding to each other when holding was necessary.

"Sixty million miles away tonight," said Janice, "some men on another planet are building a town for us. I can't believe it."

"The only thing to believe is getting to the Rocket Port in the morning," said Leonora.

"Here's my wedding gown. How strange. To be married on Mars."

They moved to the open window and looked at the soft night sky.

"That's the star," said Janice, pointing. "That's Mars."

They passed a fear between themselves by contacting their cold elbows.

"We'd better get to bed."

"No," said Janice. "At midnight the call comes. I'll talk on the light-phone to Mars for the first time. I couldn't sleep, waiting. I want to think of things to say to Will. To tell him I've decided, suddenly, to come there to him. I'm scared now, I changed my mind so quickly."

Still they could not move themselves or each other from the window which framed the sky and the sky which framed the blue-white stars. They tried to see the men in the sky rushing in great Independence Day rockets, on jets of yellow and white flame, hitting at Mars with hammers, nailing together houses, and pouring asphalt highways on a remote planet. But their eyes were glazed over with the miracle.

"This is our last night on Earth..." But before Janice could continue, Leonora had given her such a frightened look she paused.

Our last night. Their mouths moved, silently, and their eyes said it, too, as if for each day in the past month they had turned aside from the final knowledge.

"Just think, our children won't be Americans or Earth people at all. We'll all be Martians for the rest of our lives."

Janice gazed directly at herself in the cold bedroom mirror, identified an expression in her face and said, "I don't want to go, I don't want to go."

She closed her eyes and felt Leonora take hold of her shoulders and rock her slowly.

"You'll be all right."

The panic was in Janice, with ice and fire.

"I'm afraid!"

"We're all afraid."

"Sixty million miles!" she cried,

stunned by the total. "Why should I go there?"

"Because it's a New World. Because it's like the old days when America began. The men went first and the women after."

"Why should I go, tell me!" Janice shook her head between her hands, and then sat down, holding her knees with clenching fingers.

"Because," said Leonora at last, quietly, "Will's up there."

His name was a ride to hear. Janice opened her eyes at it.

"These men," said Leonora. "They make it so hard. It used to be if a woman ran a hundred miles after a man it was something, and then it was a thousand miles and now they put a whole universe between themselves and us. But that can't stop us, can it?"

They both smiled, uncertainly, at the two seated women in the cool mirror.

"I'm so afraid I'll be a fool on the Rocket," said Janice.

"I'll be right with you," Leonora arose. "And now, let's walk downtown, let's take a ride, let's see everything before we leave."

"Tomorrow night," murmured Jan-

ago. It was this that made up my mind for me, made me decide to go. I didn't tell you. But I want you to see it now. Go ahead, read the note."

Leonora shook the note out of the envelope and read it aloud:

"Dear Janice: This is our house if you decide to come to Mars. Will."

Leonora tapped the envelope again and a color photograph dropped out, glistening, on the counter. It was a picture of a house, a dark, mossy, ancient, caramel-brown, comfortable house with red flowers and green, cool ferns bordering it, and a disreputably hairy ivy on the porch.

"But, Janice!"

"What?"

"This is a picture of your house, here on Earth, here on Elm st."

"No. Look close."

And they looked again, together, and on both sides of the comfortable dark house and behind it was scenery that was not Earth scenery. The soil was a strange color of violet, and the grass was the faintest bit red, and the sky glowed like a grey diamond, and a strange crooked tree grew to one side, looking like an old woman with crystals in her white hair.

their eyes with nostalgia, with a panic of memory that began before the thing itself was gone.

For the first time they felt that the town was beautiful and the lonely lights and the ancient bricks were beautiful, and they both felt their eyes grow large with the beauty of this feast they were giving themselves.

Their eyes were too full and yet they kept putting away each detail, each shadow, each solitary oak and elm, each passing car upon the small snaking streets beneath, until not only their eyes but their heads and then their hearts were too full.

I feel like I'm dead, thought Janice, and in the graveyard on a spring night and everything alive but me and everyone moving and ready to go on with life without me. It's like I felt each spring since I was 16, passing the graveyard, and weeping for them because they were dead, and it didn't seem fair, on nights as soft as that, that I was alive. I was guilty of living.

And now, here, tonight, I feel they have taken me from the graveyard and let me go above the town just once more to see what it is like to be living, to see a town and a people, before they slam the black door on me again.

Softly, softly, like a moth on the night wind, the helicopter took them over their lifetime and their past.

The court house clock was booming 11:45 when the helicopter departed in the starry sky, leaving them stranded on the moonlit pavement before Janice's old house. The city was asleep, and Janice's house waited for them to come in searching for sleep, which was not there.

"Is this us, here?" asked Janice. "Janice Smith and Leonora Holmes, in the year 1965?"

"Yes."

Janice licked her lips and stood straight. "I wish it was some other year."

"1492? 1612?" Leonora sighed and the wind in the trees sighed with her, moving away. "It's always Columbus Day or Plymouth Rock Day, and I'll be darned if I know what we women can do about it."

"Be old maids."

"Or, do just what we're doing."

They opened the door, the sounds of the town dying slowly in their ears. As they shut the door, the phone began to ring.

"The call!" cried Janice, running. Leonora came into the bedroom after her and already Janice was saying, "Hello, hello!" And the operator in a far city was readying the immense apparatus which would tie two worlds together, and the two women waited, one sitting and pale, the other standing, but just as pale, bent toward her.

There was a long pause, full of stars and time, a waiting pause not unlike the last three years for all of them. And now the moment had arrived, and it was Janice's turn to phone through millions upon millions of miles of meteors and comets, dodging the yellow sun which might boil or burn her words or scorch the meaning from them, but her voice went like a silver needle through everything, in stitches

## Like a Woman of Frontier, Janice Follows Her Man To Mars to Begin New Life

ice, looking out at the small town, "this'll all be here, but we won't. People'll get up, go out, come back, turn out the lights, sleep, wake again, but we won't know it and they won't miss us."

Leonora and Janice moved around each other as if they couldn't find the door.

"Come on," they said, opened the door, turned out the light, stepped outside, and shut the door behind them.

"The first thing," said Leonora, "is to have a malted milk at the drug store. There won't be malted milks on Mars for a good many years."

They walked solemnly into the drug store and sat down.

"You ladies look pretty, but you sure look sad," said Mr. Thomas, the proprietor.

"Two chocolate malteds." And Leonora smiled for both of them, as if Janice were mute.

Mr. Thomas poured the drinks for them, and they looked at the chocolate color as if it were a rare painting in a museum.

Janice fussed in her purse and took out an envelope, reluctantly, and laid it on the marble counter.

"This is from Will to me," she said. "It came in the rocket mail two days

"That's the house Will's built for me," said Janice, "on Mars. It helps to look at it. All yesterday, when I had the chance, alone, and was most afraid and panicky, I took out this picture and looked at it."

They both gazed at the dark, comfortable house sixty million miles away, familiar but unfamiliar, old but new, a yellow light shining in the right front parlor window.

"That man Will," said Leonora, nodding her head, "knows just what he's doing."

They finished their drinks.

They bought many little things to take with them—bags of candy, women's magazines, perfumes; and then they walked out into the town and hired a helicopter, not minding the expense, and heard the helicopter door slam and felt themselves whispered on the great green butterfly machine over the night town. "Anywhere at all, driver, anywhere," said Leonora.

They floated in an immense sigh above the town, which already was made remote by the little space between their machine and the earth, a town receding behind them in a black river and coming up in a tidal wave of lights and color ahead, untouchable and a dream now, already smeared in

of talking, across the big night, reverberating from the moons of Mars like pellets off great bronze gongs.

And then her voice found its way to a man in a room in a city there on another world, five minutes away by radio. And her message was this:

"Hello, Will. This is Janice!"

She swallowed.

"They say I haven't much time. A minute."

She closed her eyes.

"I want to talk slowly, but they say talk fast and get it all in. So, I want to say—I've decided. I will come up there. I'll go on the Rocket tomorrow. I will come up there to you, after all. And I love you. I hope you can hear me. I love you. It's been so long . . ."

Her voice flashed on its way to that unseen world. Now, with the message sent, the words said, she wanted to call them back, to censor, to re-arrange them, to make a prettier sentence, a fairer explanation of her soul. But already the words were hung between planets and if, by some cosmic radiation, they could have been illuminated, could have caught fire in vaporous wonder there, her love would have lit a dozen worlds and startled the night side of Earth into a premature dawn, she thought.

Now the words were not hers at all, they belonged to space, they belonged to no one until they arrived, and they were traveling at 186,000 miles a second to their target.



What will he say to me? What will he say back in his minute of time? she wondered. She fussed with and twisted the watch on her

wrist, and the light-phone receiver on her ear crackled and space talked to her with electrical jigs and dances and audible auroras.

“Has he replied?” whispered Leonora.

“Shhh!” said Janice, bending, as if sick.

Then the voice came through space from him.

“I hear him!” cried Janice.

“What does he say?”

The voice called out from Mars and took itself through the places where there was no sunrise or sunset, but always the night with a sun in the middle of the blackness. And somewhere between Mars and Earth everything of the message was lost, perhaps in a sweep of electrical gravity rushing by on the flood tides of a meteor, or interfered with by a rain of silver meteors. In any event, the small words and the unimportant words of the message were washed away. And his voice came through saying only one word:

“. . . love . . .”

After that, there was the huge night again and the sound of stars turning and suns whispering to themselves and the sound of her heart, like another world in space, filling her earphones.

“Did you *hear* him?” asked Leonora.

Janice could only nod.

“What did he say, what did he say?” cried Leonora.

But Janice could not tell anyone, it was much too good to tell. She sat, listening to that one word again and again, as her memory played it back to her. She sat listening, while Leonora took the phone away from her without her knowing it, and put it back upon its hook.

Then they were in bed and the lights out and the night wind blowing through the rooms a smell of the long journey in darkness and stars, and their voices talking of tomorrow, and the days after tomorrow which would not be days at all, but day-nights of timeless time; their

voices faded away into sleep or wakeful thinking, and Janice lay alone in her bed.

Is this how it was over a century ago, she wondered, when the women, the night before, lay ready for sleep, or not ready, in the small towns of the East, and heard the sound of horses in the night and the creak of the Conestoga wagons ready to go, and the brooding of oxen under the trees, and the cry of children already lonely before their time? All the sounds of arrivals and departures into the deep forests and fields, the blacksmiths working in their own red hells through midnight? And the smell of bacons and hams ready for the journeying, and the heavy feel of the wagons like ships foundering with goods, with water in the wooden kegs to tilt and slop across prairies, and the chickens hysterical in their slung-beneath-the-wagon crates, and the dogs running out to the wilderness ahead and, fearful, running back with a look of empty space in their eyes? Is this then how it was so long ago? On the rim of the precipice, on the edge of the cliff of stars. In their time the smell of buffalo, and in our time the smell of the Rocket. Is this then how it was?

And she decided, as sleep assumed the dreaming for her, that yes, yes indeed, very much so, irrevocably, this was as it had always been and would forever continue to be.