

# The Lonely Ones, Ray Bradbury

## The Lonely Ones

They ate six suppers in the open, talking back and forth over the small campfire. The light shone high on the silver rocket in which they had traveled across space.

From a long way off in the blue hills, their campfire seemed like a star that had landed beside the long Martian canals under the clear and windless Martian sky.

On the sixth night the two men sat by the fire, looking tensely in all directions.

“Cold?” asked Drew, for the other was shivering.

“What?” Smith looked at his arms. “No.”

Drew looked at Smith’s forehead. It was covered with sweat.

“Too warm?”

“No, not that either.”

“Lonely?”

“Maybe.” His hand jerked as he put another piece of wood on the fire.

“Game of cards?”

“Can’t concentrate.”

Drew listened to Smith’s quick shallow breathing. “We’ve our information. Each day we took pictures and ore samples. We’re about loaded. Why don’t we start the trip home tonight?”

Smith laughed. “You’re not that lonely, are you?”

“Cut it.”

They shifted their boots in the cool sand. There was no wind. The fire burned steadily, straight up, fed by the oxygen hose from the ship. They themselves wore transparent glass masks over their faces, very thin,

through which a soft oxygen film pulsed up from the oxygen vests under their jackets. Drew checked his wrist dial.

Six more hours of oxygen in his jacket. Fine.  
He pulled out his ukelele and started to strum on it carelessly, eyes half closed, leaning back to look at the stars.

The girl of my dreams is the sweetest girl  
Of all the girls I know—

Each sweet coed, like a rainbow red  
Fades in the afterglow.  
The blue of her eyes and the gold of her hair. . . .

The sound of the ukelele came up Drew's arms into his earphones. Smith could not hear the instrument, only Drew's singing. The atmosphere was too thin.

"She's the sweetheart of Sigma Chi—"

"Aw, cut it out!" cried Smith.

"What's eating you?"

"I said cut it out, is all!" Smith sat back, glaring at the other man.

"Okay, okay, don't get excited."

Drew put the ukelele down and lay back, thinking. He knew what it was. It was in him, too. The cold loneliness, the midnight loneliness, the loneliness of distance and time and space, of stars and travel and months and days.

Only too well he remembered Anna's face looking in at him through the space port of the rocket a minute before blast-off time. It was like a vivid, clear-cut blue cameo—the blue round glass and her lovely face, her hand uplifted to wave, her smiling lips and her bright eyes. She had kissed her hand to him. Then she had vanished.

He looked idly over at Smith. Smith's eyes were closed. He was turning over a thought of his own in his mind. Marguerite, of course. Wonderful Marguerite, the brown eyes and the soft brown hair. Sixty million miles away on some improbable world where they had been born.

"I wonder what they're doing tonight?" Drew said.

Smith opened his eyes and looked across the fire. Without even questioning Drew's meaning, he replied, "Going to a television concert, swimming, playing badminton, lots of things."

Drew nodded. He withdrew into himself again and he felt the sweat starting to come out in his hands and his face. He began to tremble and there was a shrill whining emotion deep inside himself.

He didn't want to sleep tonight. It would be like other nights. Out of nothing, the lips and the warmth and the dream. And, all too soon, the empty morning, the arising into the nightmare of reality.

He jumped up violently.

Smith fell back, staring.

"Let's take a walk, do something," said Drew heartily.

"All right."

They walked through the pink sands of the empty sea bottom, saying nothing, only walking. Drew felt part of the tightness vanish. He cleared his throat.

"Suppose," he said, "just to be supposing, of course, you met up with a Martian woman? Now. Some time in the next hour?"

Smith snorted. "Don't be silly. There aren't any."

"But just suppose."

"I don't know," replied Smith, looking ahead as he walked. He put his head down and rubbed his hand along the thin warm glass mask over his face. "Marguerite's waiting for me in New York."

“And Anna’s waiting for me. But let’s be practical.

Here we are, two very human men, a year away from earth, cold, lonely, isolated, in need of consolation, hand-holding. No wonder we’re brooding over the women we left behind.”

“It’s plain silly to brood, and we ought to quit it. There’s no women around anyway, drat it!”

They walked onward for a distance.

“Anyway,” Smith continued at last, after a time of thinking, “If we did find a woman here, I’m sure Marguerite would be the first to comprehend the situation and forgive me.”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely!”

“Or are you rationalizing?”

“No!”

“Let me show you something, then. Turn back. Over there.” Drew took Smith’s arm and guided him back and to one side about fifty paces.

“The reason I brought the whole subject up is this.” He pointed.

Smith gasped.

A footprint lay like a tiny soft valley in the sand.

The two men bent, put their fingers eagerly down, brushing nervously to each side of it. Their breath hissed in their nostrils. Smith’s eyes glittered.

They looked into each other’s faces for a long time.

“A woman’s footprint!” cried Smith.

“Perfect in every detail,” said Drew, nodding solemnly. “I happen to know. I once worked in a shoe store. I’d know a woman’s print anywhere. Perfect, perfect!”

They swallowed the thickened knots in their dry throats. Their hearts began to beat wildly.

Smith opened and closed his hands into fists. "Glory, it's small! Look at the toes! Gosh, it's dainty!"

He stood up and looked ahead, eyes squinted. Then, crying out, he began to run. "Here's another, and another. More. They go on, that way!"

"Take it easy," Drew caught up with him. He took hold of Smith's arm. "Where you think you're going?"

"Let go; blast it!" Smith pointed. "I'm following them up, of course. "What about Marguerite?"

"This is a devil of a time to talk of her. Let go before I crack you one!" Musingly, Drew dropped his hand. "Okay. Go ahead." They ran together. . . .

Fresh footsteps, fresh and deep and delicately defined. Footsteps that rushed, swirled, pelted on before them, coming and going, alone, across the dry sea bottom. Glance at the wrist watch.

Five minutes, then. Hurry. Rush. Run. Drew panted, laughing. Ridiculous. Silly. Two men plunging forward. Really, if it weren't such a lonely, serious thing, he would sit down and laugh until he cried. Two supposedly intelligent men, two Robinson Crusoes racing after a feminine and as yet invisible girl Friday! Ha!

"What's funny?" shouted Smith, far ahead.

"Nothing. Watch the time. Oxygen gives out, you know."

"We've plenty."

"Watch it, though!"

Did she realize when she came by here, thought Drew amusedly, putting her footfalls so delicately into the earth, that by so doing, so

innocently laying her gentle small feet, she would cause a crisis among men? No. Totally unaware. Totally.

He must run anyway and keep up with that insane Smith. Silly, silly. And yet—not so silly.

As Drew ran, a warmth filled his head. After all, it would be swell to sit by the fire tonight beside a beautiful woman, holding her hand, kissing her and touching her.

“What if she’s blue?”

Smith turned as he ran. “What?”

“What if her skin’s blue? Like the hills? What then?”

“Blast you, Drew!”

“Ha!” Drew shouted his laugh and they pelted into an old river draw and along a canal, both lying empty in the seasonless time.

The footprints moved delicately on and on to the foothills. They had to stop when they reached the climb.

“Dibs,” said Drew, eyes sharp and yellow.

“What?”

“I said ‘Dibs on her.’ That means I get to speak to her first. Remember when we were kids? We said ‘Dibs.’ Okay. I just said ‘Dibs.’ That makes it official.”

Smith was not smiling.

“What’s wrong, Smith? ‘Fraid of competition?” said Drew.

Smith did not speak.

“I’ve got quite a profile,” Drew pointed out. “Also, I’m four inches taller.”

Smith looked coldly at him. His eyes were still.

“Yes, sir, competition,” Drew went on. “Tell you what, Smith—if she’s got a friend, I’ll let you have the friend.”

“Shut up,” said Smith glaring at him.

Drew stopped smiling and stood back. “Look here, Smith, you better take it slow. You’re getting all het up. I don’t like to see you this way. Everything’s been fine until now.”

“I’ll act anyway I please. You just keep out of my business. After all, I found the footprints!”

“Say that again.”

“Well, you found them, maybe, but it was my idea to follow them up!”

“Was it?” Drew said slowly.

“You know it was.”

“Do I?”

“Holy Pete, a year in space, no company, nothing, traveling, and now when something like this happens, someone human—”

“Someone feminine.”

Smith cocked his fist. Drew caught it, twisted it, slapped Smith’s face.

“Wake up!” he shouted into the blank face. “Wake up!” He seized Smith’s shirt front. He shook him like a kid. “Listen, listen, you fool! Maybe she’s somebody else’s woman. Think of that. Where there’s a Martian woman, there’s going to be a Martian man, you chump.”

“Let go of me!”

“Think of it, you idiot, that’s all.” Drew gave Smith a shove. Smith toppled, almost fell, reached for his gun, thought better of it, shoved it back.

But Drew had seen the gesture. He looked at Smith. “So it’s come to that, has it? You really are in a bad way, aren’t you? The old cave man himself.”

“Shut up!” Smith started to walk on, climbing. “You don’t understand.”

“No, I’ve been nowhere the last year. I’ve been home with Anna every night. I’ve been warm and safe in New York. You went on the trip all by your lonely little self!” Drew snorted violently and swore. “You sure are an egocentric little squirt!”

They climbed a hill of sand and were among other hills where the footprints led them. They found an abandoned fireplace, charred sticks of wood, a small metal tin which had once, from its arrangement, contained oxygen to feed the fire. They looked new.

“She can’t be much farther on.” Smith was ready to drop, but still he ran. He slugged his feet into the sand and gasped.

I wonder what she’s like, thought Drew, moving in his thoughts, freely, wonderingly. I wonder if she’s tall and slender or small and very thin. I wonder what color eyes, what color hair she has? I wonder what her voice is like? Sweet, high? Or soft and very low?

I wonder a lot of things. So does Smith. Smith’s wondering, too, now. Listen to him wonder and gasp and run and wonder some more. This isn’t any good. It’ll lead us to something bad, I know. Why do we go on? A silly question. We go on, of course, because we’re only human, no more, no less.

I just hope, he thought, that she doesn’t have snakes for hair.  
“A cave!”

They had come to the side of a small mountain, into which a cave went back through darkness. The footprints vanished within. Smith snatched forth his electric torch and sent the beam inside, flashing it swiftly about, grinning with apprehension. He moved forward cautiously, his breath rasping in the earphones.  
“It won’t be long now,” said Drew.

Smith didn’t look at him.



They walked together, elbows bumping. Every time Drew tried to draw ahead, Smith grunted and increased his pace; his face angry with color. The tunnel twisted, but the footprints still appeared as they flicked the torch beam down.

Suddenly they came out into an immense cave. Across it, by a campfire which had gone out, a figure lay.

“There she is!” shouted Smith. “There she is!”

“Dibs,” whispered Drew quietly.

Smith turned, the gun was in his hand. “Get out,” he said.

“What?” Drew blinked at the gun.

“You heard what I said, get out!”

“Now, wait a minute—”

“Get back to the ship, wait for me there!”

“If you think you’re going to—”

“I’ll count to ten, if you haven’t moved by then, I’ll burn you where you stand—”

“You’re crazy!”

“One, two, three, better start moving.”

“Listen to me, Smith, for Heaven’s sake!”

“Four, five, six, I warned you—ah!”

The gun went off.

The bullet struck Drew in the hip, whirling him about to fall face down, crying out with pain. He lay in darkness.

“I didn’t mean it, Drew, I didn’t!” Smith cried. “It went off; my finger, my hand, nervous; I didn’t mean it!” A figure bent down in the blazing light, turned him over. “I’ll fix you up, I’m sorry. I’ll get her to help us. Just a second!”

The pain in his side, Drew lay watching as the torch turned and Smith rushed loudly across the long cave toward the sleeping figure by the black fire. He heard Smith call out once or twice, saw him approach and bend down to the figure, touch it.

For a long time, Drew waited.  
Smith turned the figure over.

From a distance, Drew heard Smith say, "She's dead."

"What!" called Drew. With fumbling hands he was taking out a small kit of medicine. He broke open a vial of white powder which he swallowed. The pain in his side stopped instantly. Now he went about bandaging the wound. It was bad enough, but not too bad. In the middle distance he saw Smith standing all alone, his torch senselessly in his numb hand, looking down at the woman's figure.

Smith came back and sat down and looked at nothing.

"She's—she's been dead a long long time."

"But the footprints? What about them?"

"This world, of course, this world. We didn't stop to think. We just ran. I just ran. Like a fool. This world, I didn't think until now. Now I know."

"What is it?"

"There's no wind, nothing. No seasons, no rain, no storms, no nothing. Ten thousand years ago, in a dying world, that woman there walked across the sands, alone. Maybe the last one alive.

With a few oxygen tins to keep her going. Something happened to the planet. The atmosphere drained off into space. No wind, no oxygen, no seasons. And her walking alone." Smith shaped it in his mind before telling it quietly to Drew, not looking at him. "And she came to this cave and lay down and died."

"Ten thousand years ago?"

“Ten thousand years. And she’s been here ever since. Perfect. Lying here, waiting for us to come and make fools of ourselves. A cosmic joke. Ah, yes! Very funny.”

“But the footprints?”

“No wind. No rain. The footprints look just as fresh as the day she made them, naturally. Everything looks new and fresh. Even her. Except there’s something about her. Just by seeing her you know she’s been dead a long long while. I don’t know what it is.”

His voice faded away.

Suddenly he remembered Drew. “My gun. You. Can I help?”

“I got it all dressed. It was an accident. Let’s put it that way.”

“Does it hurt?”

“No.”

“You won’t try and kill me for this?”

“Shut your mouth. Your finger slipped.”

“It did—it really did! I’m sorry.”

“I know it did. Shut up.” Drew finished packing the wound. “Give me a hand now, we’ve got to get back to the ship.” Smith helped him grunt to his feet and stand swaying. “Now walk me over so I can take a look at Miss Mars, ten thousand B.C. After all that running and this trouble I ought to get a look at her, anyway.”

Smith helped him slowly over to stand above the sprawling form.

“Looks like she’s only sleeping,” said Smith. “But she’s dead, awful dead. Isn’t she pretty?”

She looks just like Anna, thought Drew, with a sense of shock. Anna sleeping there, ready to wake and smile and say hello.

“She looks just like Marguerite,” Smith said.

Drew's mouth twitched. "Marguerite?" He hesitated. "Yes. Y-yes, I guess she does." He shook his head. "All depends on how you look at it. I was just thinking myself—"

"What?"

"Never mind. Let her lie. Leave her there. Now, we've got to hurry. Back to the ship for us."

"I wonder who she was?"

"We'll never know. A princess maybe. A stenographer in some ancient city, a dancing maid? Come on, Smith."

They made it back to the rocket in half an hour, slowly and painfully.

"Aren't we fools, though? Really prime fools?"

The rocket door slammed.

The rocket fired up on fountains of red and blue flame.

Below, the sand was stirred and blasted and blown. The footprints, for the first time in ten thousands years were disturbed. They blew away in fine particles. When the fire wind died, the prints were gone.

The End