The Wilderness, Ray Bradbury

The Wilderness

‘Oh, the Good Time has come at last—’

It was twilight, and Janice and Leonora packed steadily in their summer house, singing songs, eating little, and holding to each other when necessary. But they never glanced at the window where the night gathered deep and the stars came out bright and cold.

‘Listen!’ said Janice.

A sound like a steamboat down the river, but it was a rocket in the sky, And beyond that—banjos playing? No, only the summer-night crickets in this year 2003. Ten thousand sounds breathed through the town and the weather.

Janice, head bent, listened. Long, long ago, 1849, this very street had breathed the voices of ventriloquists, preachers, fortunetellers, fools, scholars, gamblers, gathered at this selfsame Independence, Missouri.

Waiting for the moist earth to bake and the great tidal grasses to come up heavy enough to hold the weight of their carts, their wagons, their indiscriminate destinies, and their dreams.

‘Oh, the Good Time has come at last,

 To Mars we are a-going, sir,

 Five Thousand Women in the sky,

 That’s quite a springtime sowing, sir!’

‘That’s an old Wyoming song,’ said Leonora. ‘Change the words and it’s fine for 2003.’

Janice lifted a matchbox of food pills, calculating the totals of things carried in those high-axled, tall-bedded wagons. For each man, each woman, incredible tonnages! Hams, bacon slabs, sugar, salt, flour, dried fruits, ‘pilot’ bread, citric acid, water, ginger, pepper—a list as big as the land! Yet here, today, pills that fit in a wristwatch fed you not from Fort Laramie to Hangtown, but all across a wilderness of stars.

Janice threw wide the closet door and almost screamed. Darkness and night and all the spaces between the stars looked out at her.

Long years ago two things had happened. Her sister had locked her, shrieking, in a closet. And, at a party, playing hide-and-seek, she had run through the kitchen and into a long dark hall. But it wasn’t a hall. It was an unlit stairwell, a swallowing blackness. She had run out upon empty air. She had pedaled her feet, screamed, and fallen! Fallen in midnight blackness.

Into the cellar. It took a long while, a heartbeat, to fall. And she had smothered in that closet a long, long time without daylight, without friends, no one to hear her screamings. Away from everything, locked in darkness. Falling in darkness. Shrieking!

The two memories.

Now, with the closet door wide, with darkness like a velvet shroud hung before her to be stroked by a trembling hand, with the darkness like a black panther breathing there, looking at her with unlit eyes, the two memories rushed out.

Space and a falling. Space and being locked away, screaming. She and Leonora working steadily, packing, being careful not to glance out the window at the frightening Milky Way and the vast emptiness. Only to have the long-familiar closet, with its private night, remind them at last of their destiny.

This was how it would be, out there, sliding toward the stars, in the night, in the great hideous black closet, screaming, but no one to hear. Falling forever among meteor clouds and godless comets. Down the elevator shaft. Down the nightmare coal chute into nothingness.

She screamed. None of it came out of her mouth. It collided upon itself in her chest and head. She screamed. She slammed the closet door! She lay against it! She felt the darkness breathe and yammer at the door and she held it tight, eyes watering.

She stood there a long time, until the trembling vanished, watching Leonora work. And the hysteria, thus ignored, drained away and away, and at last was gone. A wristwatch ticked, with a clean sound of normality, in the room.

‘Sixty million miles.’ She moved at last to the window as if it were a deep well. ‘I can’t believe that men on Mars, tonight, are building towns, waiting for us.’

‘The only thing to believe is catching our Rocket tomorrow.’

Janice raised a white gown like a ghost in the room.

‘Strange, strange. To marry—on another world.’

‘Let’s get to bed.’

‘No! The call comes at midnight. I couldn’t sleep, thinking how to tell Will I’ve decided to take the Mars Rocket. Oh, Leonora, think of it, my voice traveling sixty million miles on the light-phone to him. I changed my mind so quick—I’m scared!’

‘Our last night on Earth.’

Now they really knew and accepted it; now the knowledge had found them out. They were going away, and they might never come back. They were leaving the town of Independence in the state of Missouri on the continent of North America, surrounded by one ocean which was the Atlantic and another the Pacific, none of which could be put in their traveling cases.

They had shrunk from this final knowledge. Now it was facing them. And they were struck numb.

‘Our children, they won’t be Americans, or Earth people at all. We’ll all be Martians, the rest of our lives.’

‘I don’t want to go!’ cried Janice suddenly.

The panic froze her.

‘I’m afraid! The space, the darkness, the Rocket, the meteors! Everything gone! Why should I go out there?’

Leonora took hold of her shoulders and held her close, rocking her. ‘It’s a new world. It’s like the old days. The men first and the women after.’

‘Why, why should I go, tell me!’

‘Because,’ said Leonora at last, quietly, seating her on the bed, ‘Will is up there.’

His name was good to hear, Janice quieted.

‘These men make it so hard,’ said Leonora. ‘Used to be if a woman ran two hundred miles for a man it was something. Then they made it a thousand miles. And now they put a whole universe between us. But that can’t stop us, can it?’

‘I’m afraid I’ll be a fool on the Rocket.’

‘I’ll be a fool with you,’ Leonora got up. ‘Now, let’s walk around town, let’s see everything one last time.’

Janice stared out at the town. ‘Tomorrow night this’ll all be here, but we won’t. People’ll wake up, eat, work, sleep, wake again, but we won’t know it, and they’ll never miss us.’

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

‘Come on.’

They opened the door, switched off the lights, stepped out, and shut the door behind them.

In the sky there was a great coming-in and coming-in. Vast flowering motions, huge whistlings and whirlings, snowstorms falling. Helicopters, white flakes, dropping quietly. From west and east and north and south the women were arriving, arriving.

Through all of the night sky you saw helicopters blizzard down. The hotels were full, private homes were making accommodations, tent cities rose in meadows and pastures like strange, ugly flowers, and the town and the country were warm with more than summer tonight.

Warm with women’s pink faces and the sunburnt faces of new men watching the sky. Beyond the hills rockets tried their fire, and a sound like a giant organ, all its keys pressed upon at once, shuddered every crystal window and every hidden bone. You felt it in your jaw, your toes, your fingers, a shivering.

Leonora and Janice sat in the drugstore among unfamiliar women.

‘You ladies look very pretty, but you sure look sad,’ said the sodafountain man.

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

They gazed at the chocolate drink as if it were a rare museum painting. Malts would be scarce for many years on Mars.

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

‘This is from Will to me. It came in the Rocket mail two days ago. It was this that made up my mind for me, made me decide to go. I didn’t tell you. 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 Street!’

‘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 gray diamond, and a strange crooked tree grew to one side, looking like an old woman with crystals in her white hair.

‘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. Outside, a vast warm crowd of strangers wandered by and the ‘snow’ fell steadily in the summer sky.

They bought many silly things to take with them, bags of lemon candy, glossy women’s magazines, fragile perfumes; and then they walked out into the town and rented two belted jackets that refused to recognize gravity and imitated only the moth, touched the delicate controls, and felt themselves whispered like white blossom petals over the town. ‘Anywhere,’ said Leonora, ‘anywhere at all.’

They let the wind blow them where it would; they let the wind take them through the night of summer apple trees and the night of warm preparation, over the lovely town, over the houses of childhood and other days, over schools and avenues, over creeks and meadows and farms so familiar that each grain of wheat was a golden coin.

They blew as leaves must blow before the threat of a fire-wind, with warning whispers and summer lightning crackling among the folded hills. They saw the milkdust country roads where not so long ago they had drifted in moonlit helicopters in great whorls of sound spiraling down to touch beside cool night streams with the young men who were now gone.

They floated in an immense sigh above a town already made remote by the little space between themselves 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 their eyes with nostalgia, with a panic of memory that began before the thing itself was gone.

Blown quietly, eddying, they gazed secretly at a hundred faces of dear friends they were leaving behind, the lamplit people held and framed by windows which slid by on the wind, it seemed; all of Time breathing them along.

There was no tree they did not examine for old confessions of love carved and whittled there, no sidewalk they did not skim across as over fields of mica-snow. For the first time they knew their town was beautiful and the lonely lights and the ancient bricks beautiful, and they both felt their eyes grow large with the beauty of this feast they were giving themselves.

All floated upon an evening carrousel, with fitful drifts of music wafting up here and there, and voices calling and murmuring from houses that were whitely haunted by television.

The two women passed like needles, sewing one tree to the next with their perfume. 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 below, 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 when I was sixteen, 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’s like to be living, to be a town and a people, before they slam the black door on me again.

Softly, softly, like two white paper lanterns on a night wind, the women moved over their lifetime and their past, and over the meadows where the tent cities glowed and the highways where supply trucks would be clustered and running until dawn. They hovered above it all for a long time.

The courthouse clock was booming eleven forty-five when they came like spider webs floating from the stars, touching 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 their sleep, which was not there.

‘Is this us, here?’ asked Janice. ‘Janice Smith and Leonora Holmes, in the year 2003?’

‘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 of the warm night house, 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 had the receiver up and 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, running away from 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 of talking, across the big night, reverberating from the moons of Mars.

And then her voice found its way to a man in a room in a city there on another world, five minutes by radio away. 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 slow, 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 motioned on its way to that unseen world. Now, with the message sent, the words said, she wanted to call them back, to censor, to rearrange 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, 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 one hundred and eighty-six thousand miles a second to their destination.

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 answered?’ whispered Leonora.

‘Shhh!’ said Janice, bending, as if sick.

Then his voice came through space.

‘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 bear 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. She sat listening, while Leonora took the phone away from her without her knowing it and put it down 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.

The end