

*Ray Bradbury*

## THE ONE WHO WAITS

I live in a well. I live like smoke in the well. Like vapor in a stone throat. I don't move. I don't do anything but wait. Overhead I see the cold stars of night and morning, and I see the sun. And sometimes I sing old songs of this world when it was young. How can I tell you what I am when I don't know? I cannot. I am simply waiting. I am mist and moonlight and memory. I am sad and I am old. Sometimes I fall like rain into the well. Spider webs are startled into forming where my rain falls fast, on the water surface. I wait in cool silence and there will be a day when I no longer wait.

Now it is morning. I hear a great thunder. I smell fire from a distance. I hear a metal crashing. I wait. I listen.

Voices. Far away.

"All right!"

One voice. An alien voice. An alien tongue I cannot know. No word is familiar. I listen.

"Send the men out!"

A crunching in crystal sands.

"Mars! So this is it!"

"Where's the flag?"

"Here, sir."

"Good, good."

The sun is high in the blue sky and its golden rays fill the well and I hang like a flower pollen, invisible and misting in the warm light.

Voices.

"In the name of the Government of Earth, I proclaim this to be the Martian Territory, to be equally divided among the member nations."

What are they saying? I turn in the sun, like a wheel, invisible and lazy, golden and tireless.

"What's over here?"

"A well!"

"No!"

"Come on. Yes!"

The approach of warmth. Three objects bend over the well mouth, and my coolness rises to the objects.

"Great!"

"Think it's good water?"

"We'll see."

"Someone get a lab test bottle and a dropline."

"I will!"

A sound of running. The return.

"Here we are."

I wait.

"Let it down. Easy."

Glass shines, above, coming down on a slow line.

The water ripples softly as the glass touches and fills. I rise in the warm air toward the well mouth.

"Here we are. You want to test this water, Regent?"

"Let's have it."

"What a beautiful well. Look at that construction. How old you

think it is?"

"God knows. When we landed in that other town yesterday Smith said there hasn't been life on Mars in ten thousand years." "Imagine."

"How is it, Regent? The water." "Pure as silver. Have a glass." The sound of water in the hot sunlight. Now I hover like a dust, a cinnamon, upon the soft wind.

"What's the matter, Jones?"

"I don't know. Got a terrible headache. All of a sudden."

"Did you drink the water yet?"

"No, I haven't. It's not that. I was just bending over the well and all of a sudden my head split. I feel better now."

Now I know who I am.

My name is Stephen Leonard Jones and I am twenty-five years old and I have just come in a rocket from a planet called Earth and I am standing with my good friends Regent and Shaw by an old well on the planet Mars.

I look down at my golden fingers, tan and strong. I look at my long legs and at my silver uniform and at my friends.

"What's wrong, Jones?" they say.

"Nothing," I say, looking at them. "Nothing at all."

The food is good. It has been ten thousand years since food. It touches the tongue in a fine way and the wine with the food is warming. I listen to the sound of voices. I make words that I do not understand but somehow understand. I test the air.

"What's the matter, Jones?"

I tilt this head of mine and rest my hands holding the silver utensils of eating. I feel everything.

"What do you mean?" this voice, this new thing of mine, says.

"You keep breathing funny. Coughing," says the other man.

I pronounce exactly. "Maybe a little cold coming on."

"Check with the doc later."

I nod my head and it is good to nod. It is good to do several things after ten thousand years. It is good to breathe the air and it is good to feel the sun in the flesh deep and going deeper and it is good to feel the structure of ivory, and fine skeleton hidden in the warming flesh, and it is good to hear sounds much clearer and more immediate than they were in the stone deepness of a well. I sit enchanted.

"Come out of it, Jones. Snap to it. We got to move!"

"Yes," I say, hypnotized with the way the word forms like water on the tongue and falls with slow beauty out into the air.

I walk and it is good walking. I stand high and it is a long way to the ground when I look down from my eyes and my head. It is like living on a fine cliff and being happy there.

Regent stands by the stone well, looking down. The others have gone murmuring to the silver ship from which they came.

I feel the fingers of my hand and the smile of my mouth.

"It is deep," I say.

"Yes."

"It is called a Soul Well."

Regent raises his head and looks at me. "How do you know that?"

"Doesn't it look like one?"

"I never heard of a Soul Well."

"A place where waiting things, things that once had flesh, wait and wait," I say, touching his arm.

The sand is fire and the ship is silver fire in the hotness of the day and the heat is good to feel. The sound of my feet in the hard sand. I listen. The sound of the wind and the sun burning the valleys. I smell the smell of the rocket boiling in the noon. I stand below the port.

"Where's Regent?" someone says.

"I saw him by the well," I reply.

One of them runs toward the well. I am beginning to tremble. A fine shivering tremble, hidden deep, but becoming very strong. And for the first time I hear it, as if it too were hidden in a well. A voice calling deep within me, tiny and afraid. And the voice cries, *Let me go, let me go*, and there is a feeling as if something is trying to get free, a pounding of labyrinthine doors, a rushing down dark corridors and up passages, echoing and screaming.

"Regent's in the well!"

The men are running, all five of them. I run with them but now I am sick and the trembling is violent.

"He must have fallen. Jones, you were here with him. Did you see? Jones? Well, speak up, man."

"What's wrong, Jones?"

I fall to my knees, the trembling is so bad.

"He's sick. Here, help me with him."

"The sun."

"No, not the sun," I murmur.

They stretch me out and the seizures come and go like earthquakes and the deep hidden voice in me cries, *This is ones, this is me, that's not him, that's not him, don't believe him, let me out, let me out!* And I look up at the bent figures and my eyelids flicker. They touch my wrists.

"His heart is acting up."

I close my eyes. The screaming stops. The shivering ceases. I rise, as in a cool well, released.

"He's dead," says someone.

"Jones is dead."

"From what?"

"Shock, it looks like."

"What kind of shock?" I say, and my name is Sessions and my lips move crisply, and I am the captain of these men. I stand among them and I am looking down at a body which lies cooling on the sands. I clap both hands to my head.

"Captain!"

"It's nothing," I say, crying out. "Just a headache. I'll be all right. There. There," I whisper. "It's all right now."

"We'd better get out of the sun, sir."

"Yes," I say, looking down at Jones. "We should never have come. Mars doesn't want us."

We carry the body back to the rocket with us, and a new voice is calling deep in me to be let out.

*Help, help.* Far down in the moist earthen-works of the body. *Help, help* in red fathoms, echoing and pleading.

The trembling starts much sooner this time. The control is less

steady.

"Captain, you'd better get in out of the sun, you don't look too well, sir."

"Yes," I say. "Help," I say.

"What. sir?"

"I didn't say anything."

"You said 'Help', sir."

"Did I, Matthews, did I?"

The body is laid out in the shadow of the rocket and the voice screams in the deep underwater catacombs of bone and crimson tide. My hands jerk. My mouth splits and

is parched. My nostrils fasten wide. My eyes roll. *Help, help, oh help, don't, don't, let me out, don't, don't.*

"Don't," I say.

"What, sir?"

"Never mind," I say. "I've got to get free," I say. I clap my hand to my mouth.

"How's that, sir?" cries Matthews.

"Get inside, all of you, go back to Earth!" I shout.

A gun is in my hand. I lift it.

"Don't, sir!"

An explosion. Shadows run. The screaming is cut off. There is a whistling sound of falling through space.

After ten thousand years, how good to die. How good to feel the sudden coolness, the relaxation. How good to be like a hand within a glove that stretches out and grows wonderfully cold in the hot sand. Oh, the quiet and the loveliness of gathering, darkening death. But one cannot linger on.

A crack, a snap.

"Good God, he's killed himself!" I cry, and open my eyes wide, and there is the captain lying against the rocket, his skull split by a bullet, his eyes wide, his tongue protruding between his white teeth. Blood runs from his head. I bend to him and touch him. "The fool," I say. "Why did he do that?"

The men are horrified. They stand over the two dead men and turn their heads to see the Martian sands and the distant well where Regent lies lolling in deep waters. A croaking comes out of their dry lips, a whimpering, a childish protest against this awful dream.

The men turn to me.

After a long while, one of them says, "That makes you captain, Matthews."

"I know," I say slowly.

"Only six of us left."

"Good God, it happened so quick!"

"I don't want to stay here, let's get out!"

The men clamor. I go to them and touch them now, with a confidence which almost sings in me. "Listen," I say, and touch their elbows or their arms or their hands.

We all fall silent.

We are one.

*No, no, no, no, no, no!* Inner voices crying, deep down and gone into prisons beneath exteriors.

We are looking at each other. We are Samuel Matthews and Raymond Moses and William Spaulding and Charles Evans and Forrest Cole and John Summers, and we say nothing but look upon each other and our white faces and shaking hands.

We turn, as one, and look at the well.

"Now," we say.

*No, no, six* voices scream, hidden and layered down and stored forever.

Our feet walk in the sand and it is as if a great hand with twelve fingers were moving across the hot sea bottom.

We bend to the well, looking down. From the cool depths six faces peer back up at us.

One by one we bend until our balance is gone, and one by one drop into the mouth and down through cool darkness into the cold waters.

The sun sets. The stars wheel upon the night sky. Far out, there is a wink of light. Another rocket coming, leaving red marks on space.

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