
Planet Story
by Kate Wilhelm

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Fictionwise Contemporary
Science Fiction and Fantasy

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THERE IS NOTHING to fear on this planet.

The planet is represented in our records by a series of numbers and letters, each conveying information: distance from its sun, mass, period of rotation, presence or absence of a moon, or moons. The seedling colony that will arrive some day will name the planet.

We are twenty-seven men and women planet-side, and three more who remain on the orbiting ship -- minimum age twenty-five, maximum age fifty. This is the fourth Earth year of a seven-year contract. There were twenty-eight of us planet-side but Ito went mad and committed suicide twenty days ago, on the seventh day here.

There is abundant life here, a full spectrum from viruses to high order mammals. The animals do not fear us. We walk among them freely. Each is conditioned to fear its predator and to search out its prey. Nowhere in that scheme does man fit in.

The sun is a bright yellow glow in the clouds; it moves like a searchlight in fog to complete its trip in thirty-four hours. The planet's month is thirty-seven days. On the thirty-eighth day we shall leave. We shall take nothing with us except data, facts -- a paragraph in the catalogue of worlds. With our lives we are buying insurance for the family of Earthmen.

Olga watches me with brooding eyes, for twice I have spurned her, while I in turn watch Haarlem, a distant figure at the moment, operating his core drill with such precision and concentration it is as if he has become an extension of the mechanism he uses. I wonder at the affinity that sometimes exists between man and his machinery, an affinity that seems reciprocal in that now the will of the human rules, and again he is ruled by the demands of his tool. I concentrate on Olga and Haarlem and my abstract thoughts because here within reach of the ship, in sight of my friends and co-workers, I am afraid.

My buzzer sounds and I turn it off and go back to the ship, the end of my duty break. Since Ito's death we have taken turns at the computer, coding the data, transmitting everything to our orbiting ship. Should Haarlem die, another would operate his core drill, complete his geological survey; should I die, another would don my doctor's garb and check temperatures, administer to the ill and injured. I wait for my signal to activate the steps and the airtlock door to the decontamination chamber and as I wait I watch Haarlem, a distant figure. I am eager to be inside, my suit off, breathing the air of the ship, not that from my oxy-pack, and I want to whirl about, to find whatever it is making my heart beat too fast.

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On this gentle continent, on this benign planet where there is no menace to mankind in the air, on the ground, beneath the ground, no menace of any kind, I am afraid. We all are afraid. No one speaks of his fear because there is nothing to allude to as a possible source. No sighing wind in the trees, no alien ghosts among ruins, no psychic call from a gloomy wood. Nothing. A broad plain of low vegetation; animals grazing; a hazy sky; a flock of small, furry, flying animals that appear soft and pettable; an iridescent gauzy wing of an insect that hovers, then darts away, insect-like. There are no ruins on this planet. No artifacts. No intelligent life has ever walked here until now. There is the

plain that stretches to the horizon to the east, and the hills rounded with age and covered with trees spaced as if planned, park-like, garden-like. Elvil assures us there is no plan, this is how trees grow if left alone. There are the flowers that grow at the junction of the forest and plain: bushes with blue flowers, carpeting plants with yellow masses of blooms, vines that curl and twist their way up the trees that edge the forest. Red flowers hang downward, with long slender stamens that sway with the wind, like dancers in yellow tights against a scarlet velvet backdrop. The flowers are the buffer zone between forest and plain, a living flag of truce, promising no encroachment on the part of either for

ground already held by the other.

The steps descend and I climb upward and turn momentarily, to see Olga's face lifted, as she watches me with brooding eyes. I enter the chamber where a spray cleanses my suit, and lights dry it and finish the process. I discard the garment and step naked into the shower and remain under the warm water for the allotted time, wishing it were longer, and, still naked, go into the dressing room where Derek is preparing to go outside. Elvil is assisting him.

I watch him dress and realize, belatedly, he is dressing for a trip in one of the flyers. Our ships are like Chinese puzzle boxes: Inside each there is a smaller one, which in turn contains

another even smaller. We have three flyers on the landing ship, each large enough for six or eight people. Two of them are with the ocean party, and now Derek plans to use the third. He is pulling on his heavier suit, his gloves are at his belt.

"Where are you going?"

"To the ocean group. Jeanne is missing." I feel a lurch in my stomach. Jeanne? She is tall and has hair the color of sun on pale sand, blindingly bright, with dark streaks. Her skin is baby smooth and there is a joy in her that makes her a favorite of everyone.

"They need a third car for the search," Derek says, and now he is ready. Elvil double checks him and he enters the

decontamination chamber.

"They'll find her," Elvil says then, his hand heavy and cold on my bare shoulder. I nod and clasp his hand briefly.

* * * *

While the ship is on the ground the seats for thirty become narrow beds, each with a screen that can be closed. When I am relieved at the computer I find Olga waiting for me in my tiny area of privacy.

"Please," she says, "don't make me leave. I only want to talk." It is not yet dark outside; my mind is on the search that is continuing along the ocean's edge. But I am very tired. I sit by Olga and draw her close and hold her. She is

trembling.

"I am so afraid," she whispers. "I keep looking around to see what's there, and there's nothing. And that makes it worse." Her trembling increases and I lie down with her and stroke her and think of the search. Olga is beautiful in a broad-hipped, large-breasted way that is pure sensuality. Her responses to any touch are always sexual. She apologizes for it often, but everyone understands her needs, and few deny her the caresses she craves, the release she must have. Her trembling now however is not caused by sexual tension, but fear, and I don't know how to allay it. We should have a meeting, an open session with everyone present, and air our fears, I decide. After

the search for Jeanne is completed, I'll call a meeting here on the ship, another with the shore party. Derek can preside there. He will know how to conduct it, what to look for, how to force it along certain lines.

Olga moans and I turn my attention once more to her. She has forgotten her fear, at least for the moment. When I leave her, she is sleeping peacefully.

The captain's office is next to my infirmary. He is a slender man, with delicate hands, and he, like Haarlem, has an affinity for his machines. Sometimes I feel he and the ship are one. His face is deeply carved and often he is careless with his depilatory cream and misses a fissure in which dark hairs grow

luxuriantly, until the next time he removes his beard. Those dark lines make his face look like a caricature. He is studying a monitor on his desk when I enter. It is the search area near the ocean. I read the moving lights as readily as he, but I ask anyway.

"Any news yet?"

"Nothing."

We continue to watch together for a few moments, and then I sit down opposite him and say, "She has done it deliberately then." He nods. There are constant signals from the suits unless the wearer turns them off. Two buttons are involved requiring both hands to deactivate the signal system. It is an impossibility for it to happen

accidentally.

"Like Ito," I say. Not like, but he knows what I mean. Ito hanged himself.

"I'm afraid so," he says. He looks at me, but doesn't turn off his monitor. "Have you any suggestions?"

"None. I'd like an open session, as soon as possible." There is no immediate response. He must weigh the possible results: an increase of fear if it becomes acknowledged, a decrease, a cause identified, someone else being driven to suicide. There are ten days remaining to us on this planet. He says, "Today I found myself stopping to hear if there were footsteps behind me. I have been uneasy before, not like this though. I looked around before I could control

myself."

"I know. It's getting worse." The kindest among us have become withdrawn, short tempered; the indifferent ones have become quarrelsome; the ones tending toward meanness in the best of times have become vicious. Always before, the ubiquitous dangers of unknown worlds have drawn us closer, but here, in the total absence of any threat, we are struggling to free ourselves from the mutual dependency that is as necessary to our success as the individual skills each brings to the service. I shrug. "I look, too," I say.

"There's nothing."

He glances at the search monitor and

says, "When do you want your session?"

"When we get up, before sunrise." It is a good time, when defenses are down somewhat. Everyone will welcome a break in the record-keeping chores that occupy us all in the hours after we sleep and before sunrise. The nights are very long on this planet with its thirty-four-hour day. I rise to leave him and pause before stepping over the portal. "I'm sorry about Jeanne, Wes." I know she was a favorite of his, also. He has few he can turn to. Something keeps him aloof from the rest of us, but he had Jeanne and now he won't have her. I am sorry.

* * * *

High above the atmosphere of this

planet the orbiting ship is studying the sun. Closer, spy satellites weave an invisible web as they spin in their separate orbits, mapping the world, sensing mineral deposits, ocean depths, volcanic regions. On the surface, our group, split into halves, makes a minute examination of the soil, the air, the rivers and shores, the animal life. This planet can withhold no secrets from our assault: the nitrogen content of the soil, the bone composition of the animals, the oxygen dissolved in the streams, the parts per million of spores, bacteria, pollen in the air. Nothing will remain hidden. Our preliminary reports prepared in the first three days indicated there is nothing harmful to man on this

planet. The group that gathers for the open session knows all this. We meet in the main room of the ship, where each of us has his own seat-bed, with a screen to be closed at will. The seats are upright now, the screens open. We are a good group, I know. We can trust one another. We know each has proven his bravery, his intelligence frequently enough not to have it questioned. We are close enough emotionally to be able to forego any preliminaries, intimate enough to recognize any signs of hesitation or evasion.

"I would like to try to get a profile of whatever it is causing our fears," I say. "Since there is nothing that anyone can see, or detect with instruments, we might

approach with the possibility that it is a projection. This is not a conclusion, merely a place to start." There are nods, and only Haarlem seems disapproving of this beginning. I call on him first. "Have you ever felt a comparable uneasiness that you couldn't rationalize?"

He shakes his head silently and I feel a flush of annoyance with him.

"Is there anyone who has felt a similar, baseless fear?"

"Once," Louenvelt says, "when I was a child, no more than four. I wakened with a feeling of great fear, afraid to move, unable to say why. Not the usual nightmare awakening, but similar to it. There had been an earthquake, quieted by the time I was thoroughly awake, but I

didn't know that at the time." Louenvelt is our botanist, a quiet man who seldom participates in any group activity. I am grateful that he has started the session. Sharkey is next to speak, and I know I will have to bear this, too. Sharkey is querulous: conversation with him is always one sided and endless.

"On my first Contract," he says, with an air of settling in, "we were faced with these bear-like beings. Big. Big as grizzlies, that's why we called them bears, even though they ..."

"But you knew what frightened you," I say firmly. "That isn't what we're after right now."

"Well, we knew those bears would tear us limb from limb, and they were

smart, even if the computer did rate them non-intelligent. The dominant species: That always is a clue about ..."

I depress the button of my recorder to underline what he has just said. He has given me something to think about after all. There is no dominant species on this planet.

Olga has stood up and there is excitement on her face. "You said it might be a projection," she says. "But what if it isn't? What if there are things that we can't detect simply because we've never had to detect them before?" Sharkey gives way to her amiably. He is used to being interrupted.

"What do you mean?" I ask. Olga is a zoologist, specializing in holographic

scanning of animals. She can make replications of animals with her equipment, down to the nerve endings. With her holograms and a blood sample, a nail, hoof, or hair clipping, she can tell you what the animal customarily eats, its rate of growth, its life span.

"I mean that no matter how much information we have, we always have to add more with new facts. The computer can't be more intelligent than its programmers. We all know that. And if we are faced with something that no one has ever seen before, of course we haven't got that information in the computer. The sensors can't report what they haven't been programmed to sense, any more than a metal detector will

indicate plastic." She sits down again with a smug air.

Haarlem says, "And the evidence of our eyes? And our ears? Are we to believe that we cannot hear or see because we have never experienced this before?" Haarlem is very dark, he keeps his head shaved, almost as if he wants to conceal nothing on the outside because he realizes that there are so many hidden places within. Olga has never repressed anything in her life. She is fair, open, quick to be wounded, quicker to heal. Haarlem bleeds internally for a long time.

"Yes, our eyes can deceive us," Olga says with some heat. "If a ghost walked in here, we would every one of us deny

our eyes!" Haarlem laughs and settles back to become a spectator once more. I study him briefly, wondering at his withdrawal, his almost sullen attitude that has kept me at a distance. I yearn for him, but in his present mood we only fight when we are together, and it is well that he rebuffs me, I decide. He is wiser in some matters than I am.

Julie tells of a time that she was overcome by fear in a deep wood in the Canadian Rockies, and someone else relates a similar feeling while at sea, standing alone in the stern of the ship. It goes on. Nearly everyone can remember such an incident, and when it is over, I wonder what we have accomplished, if we have accomplished anything. Perhaps

we will all speak of it now when it occurs. Mel Souder, our meteorologist, will chart the times and check them against weather changes, wind shifts. I expect little to come of it.

* * * *

My suit is lightweight and impermeable, my oxypack heavy on my back, an accustomed heaviness accepted as one accepts a gain in weight, or a swollen foot or hand. Awkward, but necessary. We do not breathe the air of the planets we discover. It is for the seedling colonists to take such risks, to adapt to the local conditions if necessary. We adapt to nothing but change. This is how Jeanne walked away, I think, her footsteps clear in the

sand, her tracing clear on the recorder, until suddenly there was no longer any tracing, although the footprints continued up the beach another twenty or thirty meters, and then turned inland and were lost in the undergrowth of the tangled marsh trees and bushes.

There is a pale coloring in the sky now: first comes the lightening with no particular color, and then the clouds glow as if a fire is raging somewhere, obscured by smoke and fog that lets a crimson band appear, then a golden flare, then pale pink rolling clouds, and finally the yellow spot that is too bright to look at directly, but is not defined as a sun. I walk along the edge of the flowers that divide the plain from the forest. The

vegetation is grass-like, but not grass. It is broader leaved, pliable. It springs up behind me and shows no evidence of my passing. A swarm of jade insects rises and forms a column of life that hovers a moment, disperses, and settles once more, hidden again by the plants. There are birds here, songbirds, birds of prey, shore birds. Every niche is filled from bacteria to mammals, but intelligence did not arise. Nor is there a dominant species.

I could go into the forest, walk for hours and never become lost. My belt has homing instruments that would guide me back to the ship. My oxypack has a signal to warn me when half of my supply of air is gone. And aboard ship,

telltale tracings would reveal my position at a glance to rescuers, should I faint and be unable to continue.

I suppose I am mourning Jeanne, but more than that, I am inviting the fear to come to me now. Always before I have been where I could busy myself instantly, or return to the ship, or seek out another and start a conversation designed to mask the fear. It always comes to one who is alone, in a contemplative mood possibly. Can the fear be courted? I don't know, but I will know before I return to the ship.

The resilient blades under my feet make a faint sighing sound as they straighten up. It is almost musical, a counterpoint to the rhythm of my steps,

so faint that only if I concentrate on it does it become audible. I am becoming aware of other sounds. Something in the woods is padding along in the same direction that I walk. I stop and search for it, but see nothing. When I move again I listen for it and presently it is there. A small animal, curious about me probably, not frightening. If a carnivore should become confused and attack me, I would stop it long before it could reach me. We are armed, and on many planets the arms have been necessary, but not here. I wish to see the small animal because, like it, I am curious.

From the giraffe to the platypus, from the elephant to the shrew, the crocodile to the gibbon, such is the spread of life

that we have accepted on Earth, and wherever we have gone since then, the range has been comparable. There are things that are like, but not the same, and others that are unlike anything any of us has seen before. The universal catalogue of animals would need an entire planet to house its volumes. Perhaps Olga is right, perhaps there are those things we cannot perceive because we are too inexperienced. The small animal has become tired of its game, and walks out from the brush to nibble yellow flowers. It is a pale gray quadruped, short coarse hair, padded feet, tailless, and now it evinces no interest in me at all. It is cat-like, but no one would ever mistake it for a cat. An herbivorous cat. The

animals have struck a balance on this planet. Checks and balances work here. A steady population, enough food for all, no need for the genocidal competition of other worlds. This, I feel, is the key to the planet. I have stopped to observe the cat-like animal, and now I start to walk once more, and suddenly there it is.

There has been no change in anything as far as I can tell. No sound of parallel steps, no rustling in the grass. The wind hasn't changed. Nothing has changed, but I feel the first tendrils of fear raising the hairs of my arms, playing over my scalp. I study the woods while the fear grows. Then the plain. A small furry animal flies overhead, oblivious of me, intent on his own flight into the woods. Now I

can feel my heart race and I begin to speak into my recorder, trying to put into words that which is only visceral and exists without symbols or signs that can truly define it. My physiological symptoms are not what my fear is. I describe them anyway. Now my hands are perspiring heavily and I begin to feel nausea rise and spread, weakening my legs, cramping my stomach. I am searching faster, looking for something, anything. Something to fight or run away from. And there is nothing. My heart is pounding hard and the urge to scream and run is very strong. The urge to run into the woods and hide myself among the trees is strong also, as is the urge to drop to the ground and draw myself up

into as tight and hard a ball as possible and become invisible. Nothing in the overcast sky, nothing in the woods, nothing on the plain, nothing ... From the ground then. Something coming up from the ground. I am running and sobbing into my recorder, running from the spot where it has to be, and it runs with me. I am in the woods and can't remember entering them, I remember telling myself I would not enter them. Now I can no longer see the ship in the distance and the fear is growing and pressing in on me, crushing me down into the ground. I think, if I vomit I might drown in it. The suits were not made for that contingency. I would have to take off the helmet, and expose myself to it even more.

If I turn off all my devices, then it won't be able to find me. I can hide in the woods then. Even as the thought occurs to me I start to scream. I fall to the ground and claw and scabble at it, and I scream and scream.

* * * *

I begged them not to give me a sedative, but Wes countermanded me and administered it personally and I slept. Now it is late afternoon and much of the morning is dream-like, but I know this will pass as the sedative wears off. They think I am mad, like Ito, like Jeanne probably was at the end. I am very sore. I believe I fought them when they found me in the woods clawing a hole in the ground, screaming.

I am in a restraining sheet and there is nothing I can do but wait until someone comes to see about me. Not Sharkey, I hope. But Wes is too considerate and wise to permit Sharkey access to someone who cannot walk away. It is Wes who looks in on me, and behind him I can see Haarlem. "I'm all right," I say. "Pulse normal, no fever, calm. You can release me, you know."

"How did you take your pulse?" Haarlem asks, not disbelieving, but interested.

"In the groin. I have to talk to you and this sheet makes it damned difficult."

Wes releases the restraint and I sit up. Before I can start, he says,

"If you have found out anything at all,

let's have it straight. Now. The clouds have lifted and for the first time we have the opportunity for aerial reconnaissance, and I want to go along."

The cloud cover of this planet is not thick, not like on Venus, but since our arrival there has been a haze, there have been no sharp features that were visible from the aircraft. Probably a spring feature, the meteorologist said, that would not be a factor throughout the rest of the year. With the lifting of the clouds there would be sharp shadows, and clearly defined trees and streams, and peaceful animals that would look with wonder on the things in the sky.

Inside the Chinese puzzle box are other boxes, each smaller than the last,

and our innermost box is the one-man aircraft.

"You mustn't go," I say. "Don't let anyone go anywhere alone again." The captain clears his throat and even opens his mouth but it is Haarlem who speaks first. "What happened to you?" I tell them quickly, leaving out nothing. "I recorded all of it," I say. "Until I started to scream. I turned that off."

"You knew you were going to scream?" Wes asks with some surprise, or possibly disbelief.

"I had to. The adrenalin prepares one to fight, or to run. If he can do neither and sometimes even if he can, the excess adrenalin can change the chemistry of the brain and the person may go mad. Like

Ito. Or lose consciousness. I chose to do neither. Screaming is another outlet, and I had to do something with my hands, or they would have clawed at the buttons of my controls. So I dug and screamed."

"And what have you proved?" Haarlem asks. He sounds angry now. I continue to look at Wes. "It gets overwhelming if the person is alone, beyond the reach of others, or the ship. And there is no living thing present to account for it. Unlike other fear situations where the fear peaks and then subsides, this doesn't diminish, but continues to grow."

"You were still feeling it when we found you?"

"I was. It was getting worse by the

second." I glance quickly at Haarlem and then away again. "Screaming helped keep me sane, but it didn't do a thing for the terror."

Wes stands up decisively. "I'll cancel the overflights," he says, but he gives me a bitter look, and I know he is resentful because I have denied him this pleasure: flying over a land where no man has walked, seeing what no man has seen, knowing that no man will ever see it this way in the future, for virginity cannot be restored.

"I think the other party at the shore should be recalled," I say, but now I have gone too far. He shakes his head and presently leaves me with Haarlem.

"You did a crazy thing for someone

not crazy," Haarlem says, but he is undressing as he speaks, and contentedly I move over and watch him.

* * * *

The sun is out, and the perfection of this planet, this day, is such that I feel I could expand to the sky, fill the spaces between the ground and the heavens with my being, and my being is joyful. The air is pristine. The desire to pull off our impermeable suits is voiced by nearly everyone. To run naked in the fields, to love and be loved under the golden sun, to gather flowers and strew them about for our beds, to follow the meandering stream to the river and plunge into the cool, invisible water, where the rocks and plants on the bottom are as sharp

and clear as those on the bank, these are our thoughts on this most glorious day.

An urgent message from the shore party shatters our euphoria. Tony has gone mad and has broken Francine's neck in his frenzy. He eluded the others and ran into the woods, leaving a trail of instruments behind him. Wes has ordered the shore party to return to the ship. He has ordered me to the infirmary to wait for Francine, who is dying.

* * * *

No one suggested we bury Francine. We have her body ready for space burial, and now we orbit the planet and monitor our instruments from a distance. The spy satellites will be finished in three days, and then we shall leave. We

voted unanimously that the planet is uninhabitable, and that too will be a note in the paragraph in the catalogue of worlds. No one will come here again. There is no need for further exploration; no future seedling colonists will christen this world. The planet will forever remain a number.

* * * *

Wes and I are awake, taking the first watch. Although we trust our instruments, our machines completely, we choose to have two humans awake at all times. Always before when I stood watch, it was with Haarlem, but this time I volunteered when Wes said he would be first. Haarlem didn't even look at me when I made the choice.

The Deep Sleep will erase the immediacy of the planet, melt it into the body of other planets, so that only by concentration will any of us be able to feel our experience here again. And there is something I must decide before I permit this to happen. Haarlem said, mockingly, "No one believes in heaven, or the Garden, but there is a system of responses to archetypes built into each of us, and this planet has triggered those responses." I refuse to believe him. Our instruments failed to detect a presence, a menace, a being that made what appeared to be perfection in fact a death trap. I think of the other worlds to which we have condemned our colonists, worlds too hot, or too cold, with hostile

animal life, or turbulent weather, and mutely I cry out that this planet that will remain forever a number in the catalogue of worlds is worse than any of them. None of the other worlds claimed a life, and this planet has taken four. But my dreams are troubled, and I think of the joy and serenity that we all felt, only to be overcome again by terror.

We all shared the fear. The thought races through my mind over and over. We all shared the fear. The best of us and the worst. Even I. Even I.

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