

“Homesick”

by Sarah Gailey

(598)

Three years ago, I turned off all the lights, locked the door behind me, and left Earth behind. I was the last one off the planet — the night janitor, leaving for the weekend. Except instead of the weekend, it was forever.

You’d think I’d have gotten some kind of acknowledgement for being the last one off the planet, but it didn’t happen that way. The first guy to leave, now *he* got a huge statue and a plaque at the Capitol because he was taking a huge risk. He was accepting the Crab-People’s invitation to live on their oversized planet, and who knew if they’d eat him? I mean, let’s be honest: we *all* thought they were going to eat him.

In all our hundreds of years of speculation, we never thought first contact would involve aliens who actually wanted to solve our problems.

But he went, and a then a year later he sent word back that he was fine and that the Crab-People were nice. He said that we were all welcome to join him. And everyone else went to the new planet, made new statues, carved new plaques, built new libraries.

And I was the last one. Saying goodbye to the whale, patting the tree, climbing into my little ship, and tagging along after. And by the time I showed up, they’d already forgotten about me.

It wasn’t too bad, staying behind. With everyone gone, Earth was pretty great. I got to go to the beach and see the whale, and there wasn’t a line or anything. The air cleared up pretty quickly, what with the algae bloom in full effect. I slept outside most nights; I had a sleeping bag, and I would just lay down on the grass and watch the stars until my head swam. There were a *ton* of stars. I mean a *ton*. They looked so different in real life from how they were in pictures. It was amazing.

But then I left those stars behind, and I came to the new place. You can’t stay behind forever. Right?

The Crab-People were so generous. They just wanted to stay on the few parts of their planet that they were already using, and they gave us the rest. They didn't lay out a bunch of rules for us — just the basics.

\1. Don't use their planet like we'd used Earth.

\2. Don't kill the Crab-People.

That was it.

And everyone who showed up before me, they did a great job. They all agreed not to ruin it. They weren't cutting down all the trees, and they weren't dumping toxic waste anywhere, and they weren't killing the Crab-People. Everyone was holding their breath, asking, *Can we really do it?* And by the time I showed up, they'd decided that the answer would be “yes.”

But when I told them I wanted to go back, they cracked up. Nobody wanted to hear about the endless stars, and the fact that the whale started singing after all the people left, so loud I could hear her before I could see her.

I told them how a year after they'd all left, the tree grew fruit, and inside the fruit were seeds, and I'd planted one, and it sprouted. I told them that if some of us went back, we might be able to make Earth habitable again; maybe we could all go home someday. Nobody believed me. Nobody cared.

I told them I wanted to go back, and I looked up at the all-wrong stars in the Crab-People's sky, and I wondered.

“Smear”

By Brian Evenson

(555 Words)

Axel could see a smear, something just inside the vessel’s skin. He blinked, rubbed his eyes. It was still there.

“Query,” he asked. “What am I seeing?”

The voice responded, *I cannot know what you are seeing. I can only know what you are looking at.*

“Query,” he said. “What am I looking at?”

The voice responded immediately, *Bulkhead.*

“No,” he said. “There’s something there, something more.”

He called on the vessel to remove his helmet, which it did by extruding a chrome claw from a bulkhead and plucking it deftly off his head.

He looked again. The smear was still there, just in front of the bulkhead, a few inches away from it, over his head, perhaps a meter long, a half meter wide.

“Query,” he repeated. “What am I looking at?”

Bulkhead, the voice insisted.

“No,” he said. “Between myself and the bulkhead.”

There is nothing between your eyes and the bulkhead.

But it was there, he could see it. A smear, semitransparent but certainly present. What was he seeing?

I cannot know what you are seeing., the voice said, *I can only know what you are looking at.* Which made him wonder if the voice had burrowed deeper into his head than he had realized and could hear what he was thinking.

He had been alone for a very long time. He had been strapped into the vessel and then the vessel had been accelerated to an extraordinary rate, but very gradually, over the course of days, so as not to kill him.

The chair had been made so that he would never have to leave it until he left the vessel for good. The chair was now so integrated with his body that it was hard for him to remember where body stopped and chair began. When he awoke, he felt as if he didn't have a body.

Why was he awake? Was he meant to be awake?

Why am I awake? he whispered, and suddenly there were words in front of his eyes, as if the faceplate had been written on. It was the vessel, responding.

Unexpected failure in storage system, the words read.

So he would remain unstored for the rest of the trip. Would he die? The vessel indicated he would not die: it would feed him intravenously through the chair, converting the molecules of extraneous portions of itself into nourishment. Would he waste away sitting in the chair? The vessel indicated no, that it would continue the stimulation of muscles and nerves that it had been conducting while he was in storage.

But now he had a new problem. The smear. He asked the vessel about the smear.

There is nothing there, the voice said again, despite his not following discourse protocol. *I already told you.*

His gaze slowly slid to the smear then slid away. Perhaps, if he got closer.

Vessel, he whispered, *move the chair forward.*

It was, almost, a human face. He crawled a little closer, looked up again. Still smeared, still distorted, but anamorphically transformed. Yes, a face, a face very much like his own—his own face in fact. He stared into it, filled with wonder.

After a moment the face smiled, tightly, in a way that bared its teeth.

Or would have bared them if what was inside the mouth was teeth.

There Will Come Soft Rains

By Ray Bradbury (594 Words)

In the living room the voice-clock sang, ***Tick-tock, seven o'clock, time to get up, time to get up, seven o'clock!*** as if it were afraid that nobody would. The morning house lay empty.

"Today is August 4, 2026," said a second voice from the kitchen ceiling, ***"in the city of Allendale, California."*** It repeated the date three times for memory's sake.

Eight-one, tick-tock, eight-one o'clock, off to school, off to work, run, run, eight-one! But no doors slammed, no carpets took the soft tread of rubber heels.

Nine-fifteen, sang the clock, ***time to clean.***

Out of the wall, tiny robot mice darted. They thudded against chairs, whirling their mustached runners, sucking gently at hidden dust. Then, like mysterious invaders, they popped into their burrows. The house was clean.

Ten o'clock. The house stood alone in a city of rubble and ashes; the one house left standing. At night the ruined city gave off a radioactive glow.

Ten-fifteen. The garden sprinklers whirled up in golden founts, filling the soft morning air with scatterings of brightness. The entire west face of the house was black, save for five places. Here the silhouette in paint of a man mowing a lawn. Here, a woman bent to pick up flowers. Still farther over, a small boy, hands flung into the air; higher up, the image of a thrown ball, and opposite him, a girl, hands raised to catch a ball which never came down.

Twelve noon.

A dog whined, shivering, on the front porch.

The front door recognized the dog's voice and opened. The dog ran upstairs,

hysterically yelping to each door, at last realizing, as the house realized, that only silence was there. It ran wildly in circles, biting at its tail, spun in a frenzy, and died.

Two o'clock, sang a voice.

Delicately sensing decay at last, the regiments of mice hummed out as softly as blown leaves in an electrical wind.

Two-fifteen.

The dog was gone.

In the cellar, the incinerator glowed suddenly and a whirl of sparks leaped up the chimney.

Six, seven, eight o'clock. The dinner dishes manipulated like magic tricks, and in the study a click. In the metal stand opposite the hearth where a fire now blazed up warmly, a cigar popped out, waiting.

At ten o'clock the wind blew. A falling tree bough crashed through the kitchen window. Cleaning solvent, shattered over the stove. The room was ablaze in an instant!

"Fire!" screamed a voice. The house lights flashed, water pumps shot water from the ceilings. But the solvent spread on the linoleum, licking, eating, under the kitchen door.

The house tried to save itself. Doors sprang tightly shut, but the windows were broken by the heat and the wind blew and sucked upon the fire.

The fire crackled up the stairs.

The fire was clever. It had sent flame outside the house, up through the attic to the pumps there. An explosion! The house shuddered, oak bone on bone. **Help, help! Fire! Run, run!** In the last instant under the fire avalanche, other choruses, oblivious, could be heard announcing the time, the slamming and opening front door, a thousand things happening: singing, screaming, a few last cleaning mice darting

bravely out to carry the horrid ashes away!

The fire burst the house and let it slam flat down, puffing out skirts of spark and smoke and silence.

Among the ruins, one wall stood alone. Within the wall, a last voice said, over and over again and again:

Today is August 5, 2026, today is August 5, 2026, today is . . .