

Mrs. Bagley Goes To Mars

by Kate Wilhelm

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ON A DREARY Tuesday in March, Mrs. Bagley told her family she was going to Mars. It was a day exactly like all others -- she always got up first, shook her husband, put on her robe, went to the kitchen to make coffee, pounded on Joey's door until he grunted, and then went to shower and dress, passing her husband who by then was finished with the bathroom. While she dressed and did her hair, Mr. Bagley and Joey had breakfast: cold cereal, juice she had made the night before, toast.

When she returned to the kitchen the air was smoky; a piece of burned toast lay soaking up spilled milk on the counter.

"Better take that toaster to the shop," her husband said, not looking up.

"Mom," Joey said, "you got that ten dollars?"

"What ten dollars?"

Mr. Bagley didn't look up.

"I told you. After school we get measured for caps and gowns. I gotta put ten down..."

Somewhere water was falling. A silver trickle kissed mossy rocks, a thundering cascade ripped house-sized boulders loose from the cliffs, crashed them down....

"... by six, I hope. Oh, yeah, can you spare a couple of bucks for gas?"

That was when she said, "I'm going to Mars."

Mr. Bagley, like a well-bred visitor who didn't overhear family matters, didn't look up.

Somewhere a star was going nova, a black hole was vacuuming space, a comet was combing its hair.

Mr. Bagley finished his cereal and pushed his bowl back. He had been talking "... seven calls, at least. You won't be late if we leave now. Come on. You can eat at the cafeteria, can't you?"

"I haven't even had coffee yet!"

"You can drink it on the way to the bus. Come on or we'll both be late."

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Her supervisor, Bentsen, said, "Mrs. Bagley, this is the third time in two weeks. Why?"

"It's rained three times these two weeks."

"We don't want to have to let you go, Mrs. Bagley, but... "

Somewhere a giraffe stretched out a purple tongue toward bright green leaves at the top of a tree.
Somewhere a wound-down kitten slept on a pillow, like a fuzzy pom-pom.

At her machine she pressed a knee lever and green plastic flowed toward her. They were making tank covers, or bus covers; she was not certain just what they were making. Across from her Dolores was talking.

"Ellie and me, we're walking to catch our bus and it's warm in the terminal, you know. We're carrying our coats. And here comes this black dude, big, not really black, but like coffee that's half milk, and he's staring at Ellie's. You know? Me, I'm invisible when I'm with Ellie, like a star when the sun comes up, still there, but invisible. We're talking about killing Bentsen, that's all we ever talk about any more. And this dude is staring and grinning and making sucking faces. Ellie slows down and starts to stare too, right at his dingus, and he likes that fine, you can tell. Then Ellie starts to laugh and she laughs like she's going to bust something. And she tries to keep her eyes on him, but she can't, she's laughing too hard, and she puts her arm around me and puts her head on my shoulder, like one of them. You know? And that cat, he just vanishes, melts right into the floor. Never fails! That Ellie!"

Somewhere a father was holding up a little girl so she could glimpse a shiny train sliding silently through the silver night. Somewhere a spotted dog quivered as it listened to a school bus long before it came into sight.

"You don't feel so hot or something?"

Dolores was leaning forward, looking at her. "I'm okay. I'm going to Mars, you know."

"Like that place over in Jersey? I heard they keep you a week and do exams no one else even heard of yet. Same exams they give the astronauts, I heard. You'll be okay. It's not to worry." She glanced up and pressed her knee lever hard, causing a tidal wave of plastic to flow. Bentsen passed and Dolores said, "Tell you about this guy I met last night? Ellie and me was in this place... "

Somewhere a pink bird picked out the pink stones on a beach and laid a wall. Somewhere red sands sifted moonlight and starlight and rose hues bathed the land.

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It rained on Wednesday, too. "Mrs. Bagley, is there a problem?" The personnel supervisor was very young and pretty. She wore her hair down her back and when she put on her glasses to glance at the file before her, she looked like a child playing grown up.

"I have sick leave coming, don't I?" Mrs. Bagley asked. The girl ran her finger down the paper before her. She had silver polish on her long nails. "You haven't had time off for six years!"

"There are examinations, like they give the astronauts, I understand, and they keep you at least a week. A place over in Jersey."

"Oh dear! I do hope it isn't serious. There's a form here somewhere you should have them fill out for us. Just routine." She rummaged in her desk, got up and opened a file drawer and extracted a paper. "Here we are. Now, let's just go over this together, shall we? You have to fill out this part, see? Your name, address, where you live at present..."

Somewhere rising smoke became a column that supported a gray sky over a gray land. Somewhere a golden fish floated among lily pads carelessly splashed with violet flowers.

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"Mom, I told you! We have to pay today! It's for our graduation party, over at the shore!"

Joey held out his hand and Mrs. Bagley walked around it, carrying dishes to the sink.

"I got seven calls today," Mr. Bagley said, dipping his doughnut into his coffee. "I can't make them all by bus."

Mrs. Bagley went to the bedroom to get her purse. Joey followed, his hand still out, jiggling the car keys with his other hand. She caught the keys and dropped them into her pocket. "Ask your father," she said.

"He ain't got no money."

"I get paid today. I have to go to the bank after work."

"Hey! How'm I supposed to get to school?"

"Walk."

Mr. Bagley read the paper and dunked his doughnut. Joey turned toward him, shrugged, and left the house, slamming the door. "I ain't going to school today!"

"Why'd you take his keys?"

"They aren't his. They are mine. I'm paying for the car, insurance, everything, and I'm the one who rides the bus. Not today."

"What are you mad about anyway? Because I got all them calls to make? That make you mad?"

Mrs. Bagley returned to the bedroom and took off her coat; she began to throw things out of her drawer onto the bed. She would need all her underwear, all her knee hose, no curlers. They didn't curl their hair on Mars.

"What in hell are you doing?"

"I'm going to Mars," Mrs. Bagley said. "I told you."

"You're crazy. Put that stuff away. You'll be late."

"Goodbye," Mrs. Bagley said. "I don't know how long I'll be away."

"You hear me? Put that stuff away."

Mrs. Bagley sat on the edge of the bed and presently Mr. Bagley said, "I've got to go. You sick or something? Call in sick. You got the time coming to you."

She didn't answer and after a moment he left for work. Mrs. Bagley finished packing, turned off the lights and the stove and left also.

At the plant she parked in the visitor section when she picked up her check. She went to the bank and withdrew a hundred dollars and cashed her check. Altogether she now had a little over two hundred dollars, enough, she hoped, to permit her to buy a little souvenir or two. In order not to be a burden on the flight people, she went to a supermarket and bought a few provisions for the trip -- canned apple juice, some instant coffee, cheese, crackers and several candy bars. Satisfied, she drove toward Lincoln Tunnel and New Jersey.

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It was almost dark when she pulled off the interstate and ate her crackers and cheese. She should have asked directions, she realized, but she had been so certain that she knew the way. As if she had glimpsed a map, or had gone before, she recognized the route as she reached various turns, but it would be comforting to have a map. She drank the apple juice, and with the food and drink, her certainty returned and she started to drive again.

Somewhere a ship was standing in moonlight, waiting. Somewhere the flight attendants were glancing at their watches, hoping she would not delay them too much.

She turned at Kittatinny Mountain and there on the side of the road was her guide, waving to her. When he opened the car door, the overhead light came on and he hesitated, glanced in the back seat, then back down the road she had just driven.

"It's all right," she said. "I've been expecting you." Not really him, she told herself, someone. "You do know the way, don't you?"

He got in, but kept very close to the door, pressing against it with his back in such a way that he could look at her, out the back window, back to her. "Way to where?"

"To the ship."

She hoped he wouldn't sense her disappointment in his appearance. But of course, they would look like everyone else, or their lives would be endangered.

"I've always known I'd get to go," Mrs. Bagley said. "I used to read about space and Mars, all that, when I was a girl, and once I stood out on the sidewalk and crossed my arms and tried wishing myself up, but nothing happened." The road was narrow and unmarked and she was driving slowly, braking for curves, pulling over as far as she could whenever a car approached. There was little traffic. Woods grew close to the road on both sides here, and the farm house lights were far apart. The road started to climb and she slowed more.

"You turn right up there," the guide said. He had stopped looking out the rear window, was watching her. This road was even narrower and no light at all showed.

"I suppose you were excited when you found that you were coming to Earth," Mrs. Bagley said. "It is a surprise, in a way, but not really. It's like finding something you lost a long time ago, but always felt would turn up again."

"You turn again soon," he said. "Left." He leaned forward, watching the road. "Now."

This was hardly more than a trail. Mrs. Bagley concentrated on driving. There were water-filled holes that reflected her headlights and she couldn't guess how deep they were.

"Stop," her guide said, and his voice seemed changed, deeper and thicker.

Mrs. Bagley stopped and turned off the engine, switched off the lights. She could see nothing beyond the car, could only see the outline of the man against the darkness outside, could see something gleam briefly.

"Now don't you start yelling or nothing..."

But she wasn't listening to him. "Look!" she cried. "Look at it! It's beautiful. Come on! They're waiting." She pushed the door open and jumped out, ran toward the ship.

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On Mars they allowed her to rest several minutes before they began tests to see what occupation would be suitable for her. She soon found herself installed before a machine that heat-seamed plastic to make covers for tanks, or buses, or something. The plastic was red; she operated the machine with her elbow, and the operator across from her was not Dolores.

She listened to the tongue-twisting monologue of not/Dolores until the coffee break, and then she told her supervisor she was returning to Earth.

They were sorry to lose her, they said sibilantly, but they understood. It must be very difficult to be the only Earthman on Mars. They never did understand she was a female: all Earth persons looked alike to them. "You are born," they said. "You ingest food, defecate, mature, reproduce, grow old and die. All of you alike."

Mrs. Bagley shook her head. "Your sources are wrong," she said. "Women, females, ladies, one half the population or even a little bit more don't defecate. You won't find that in your sources. They go to the little girls' room, or the powder room, or ladies' room. They freshen up, or wash their hands, or fix their make-up, but they never shit."

The Martians, hissing with bewilderment over this incomprehensible difference between the male and female organisms of the Earth species, returned to their sources. They saw Mrs. Bagley off regretfully, she thought, but did not attempt to detain her. They even returned the price of her ticket since she had not stayed the seventy-two-hour trial period.

The ship landed on the spot where she had embarked, and she stood for a short time looking at the discarded body of her former guide. It was clever of them to assume a human form and then abandon it this way, making it look like a dreadful accident, or even a homicide. No one would bother to probe deeply into the death of a bum found with a knife in his heart.

She backed out the lane carefully, made her turn and retraced her drive back home. Mr. Bagley was reading the Sunday papers when she entered the apartment.

"How's your sister?" he asked, not looking up. "I haven't seen her."

"You ain't kidding me. You think I don't know where you been? Where else would you go?" He folded the paper and started on the comics.

"Did you call her?"

"And give you that satisfaction? You kidding?"

"Where's Joey?"

"Out somewhere."

Mrs. Bagley unpacked her suitcase and put away her things, then she started dinner.

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On Monday a light drizzle was falling.

"Look, Mom, it ain't fair! I gotta pick up Suzanne and Eddie and take them to the jewelry store for their rings, and we gotta..."

Somewhere a dragon, breathing heavily, seared a shishkabob for its beloved. Somewhere a butterfly squirmed from its sleeping bag and stretched first one then the other emerald wing, and yawned.

"When you go to the store, get me some shaving cream, will you? And we're out of toothpaste, and my tan suit needs to go to the cleaners. And get that damn toaster fixed." Mr. Bagley spoke with his mouth full and didn't look at her, but marked his place in the newspaper with one finger, then resumed reading. Joey left, slamming the door.

"You got some change? I'm going to be in the Bronx all day, can't get to the bank."

She handed him a ten-dollar bill and he grunted and turned the page to the sports section.

"You better have a talk with Joey when he gets home. Out all night Saturday. To be expected when his old lady stays out all weekend. I don't like it, though, telling you." He scanned the scores, talking, eating, dripping coffee.

Somewhere rainbow-colored clouds swirled gently, thick enough to float on, to ride to earth. Somewhere a new flower opened and stared at the sun wide-eyed..

"... the hell you do, but you could let us know."

She went to the living room and started to gather dirty clothes, Joey's sweater and socks, an ashtray filled with candy wrappers, beer cans....

When she heard the door close, she dropped the dirty clothes and sat on the couch. She picked up the, classified section of the paper and, at first idly, then with more attention, began to read the Help Wanted column.

It was still drizzling when Mrs. Bagley left the apartment and took the bus to the station where she could

catch a train to Long Island. Ganymede, she thought, that was the answer. Mars had been too close, too like Earth, but Ganymede was different.

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On Ganymede they showed her an efficiency that was to be hers, and a native explained her duties to her, wished her luck and left her alone. Here they lived in immense apartments, with plush carpeting and futuristic furniture, and they spoke another language so they could not jabber at her. She was to clean the apartments for them.

She sat down and turned on her own nine-inch television set and leaned back. Somewhere, she thought, dirty clothes were rising to the ceiling, and smoke was curling up from the bottom of the heap. Somewhere dishes were growing strange molds -- gray, green, blue. Somewhere a man in an undershirt was jamming a coffee-soaked doughnut into his ear.

Later, when the building was silent and dark, she went to the street and checked one more time, and it was still there: Ganymede Arms. She went back to her room and to bed knowing they would never find her on Ganymede.

The End