

THIRD FROM THE SUN

By Richard Matheson

Escaping a known danger is highly advisable...if you can know the unknown danger ahead!

An A\NN/A Preservation Edition.

[Notes](#)

HIS EYES were open five seconds before the alarm was set to go off. There was no effort in waking. It was sudden. Coldly conscious, he reached out his left hand in the dark and pushed in the stop. The alarm glowed a second, then faded.

At his side, his wife put her hand on his arm.

“Did you sleep?” he asked.

“No, did you?”

“A little,” he said. “Not much.”

She was silent for a few seconds. He heard her throat contract. She shivered. He knew what she was going to say.

“We’re still going?” she asked.

He twisted his shoulders on the bed and took a deep breath.

“Yes,” he said, and felt her fingers tighten on his arm.

“What time is it?” she asked.

“About five.”

“We’d better get ready.”

“Yes, we’d better.”

They made no move.

“You’re sure we can get on the ship without anyone noticing?” she asked.

“They think it’s just another test flight. Nobody will be checking.”

She didn’t say anything. She moved a little closer to him. He felt how cold her skin was.

“I’m afraid,” she said.

He took her hand and held it in a tight grip. “Don’t be,” he said. “We’ll be safe.”

“It’s the children I’m worried about.”

“We’ll be safe,” he repeated.

She lifted his hand to her lips and kissed it gently.

“All right,” she said.

They both sat up in the darkness. He heard her stand. Her night garment rustled to the floor. She didn't pick it up. She stood still, shivering in the cold morning air.

“You're sure we don't need anything else with us?” she asked.

“No, nothing. I have all the supplies we need in the ship. Anyway...”

“What?”

“We can't carry anything past the guard,” he said. “He has to think you and the kids are just coming to see me off.”

SHE began dressing. He threw off the covering and got up. He went across the cold floor to the closet and dressed.

“I'll get the children up,” she said, “if they aren't already.” He grunted, pulling clothes over his head. At the door she stopped. “Are you sure—” she began.

“Hm?”

“Won't the guard think it's funny that... that our neighbors are coming down to see you off, too?”

He sank down on the bed and fumbled for the clasps on his shoes.

“We'll have to take that chance,” he said. “We need them with us.”

She sighed. “It seems so cold. So calculating.”

He straightened up and saw her silhouette in the doorway.

“What else can we do?” he asked tensely. “We can't interbreed our own children.”

“No,” she said. “It's just...”

“Just what?”

“Nothing, darling. I'm sorry.”

She closed the door. Her footsteps disappeared down the hall. The door to the children's room opened. He heard their two voices. A cheerless smile raised his lips. You'd think it was a holiday, he thought.

He pulled on his shoes. At least the kids didn't know what was happening. They thought they were going to take him down to the field. They thought they'd come back and tell all their schoolmates. They didn't know they'd never come back.

He finished clasping his shoes and stood up. He shuffled over to the bureau and turned on the light. He looked at himself in the mirror. It was odd, such an undistinguished looking man planning this.

Cold. Calculating. Her words filled his mind again. Well, there was no other way. In a few years, probably less, the whole planet would go up with a blinding flash. This was the only way out. Escaping, starting all over again with a few people on a new planet.

He stared at the reflection.

“There’s no other way,” he said.

He glanced around the bedroom.

Good-bye, this part of my life. Turning off the lamp was like turning off a light in his mind. He closed the door gently behind him and slid his fingers off the worn handle.

His son and daughter were going down the ramp. They were talking in mysterious whispers. He shook his head in slight amusement.

His wife waited for him. They went down together, holding hands.

“I’m not afraid, darling,” she said. “It’ll be all right.”

“Sure,” he said. “Sure it will.”

They all went in to eat. He sat down with his children. His wife poured out juice for them. Then she went to get the food.

“Help your mother, doll,” he told his daughter. She got up.

“Pretty soon, haah, pop?” his son said. “Pretty soon, haah?”

“Take it easy,” he cautioned. “Remember what I told you. If you say a word of it to anybody, I’ll have to leave you behind.”

A dish shattered on the floor. He darted a glance at his wife. She was staring at him, her lips trembling.

She averted her eyes and bent down. She fumbled at the pieces, picked up a few. Then she dropped them all, stood up and pushed them against the wall with her shoe.

“As if it mattered,” she said nervously. “As if it mattered whether the place is clean or not.”

The children were watching her in surprise.

“What is it?” asked the daughter.

“Nothing, darling, nothing,” she said. “I’m just nervous. Go back to the table. Drink your juice. We have to eat quickly. The neighbors will be here soon.”

“Pop, why are the neighbors coming with us?” asked his son.

“Because,” he said vaguely. “Because they want to. Now forget it. Don’t talk about it so much.”

THE room was quiet. His wife brought over their food and set it down. Only her footsteps broke the silence. The children kept glancing at each other, at their father. He kept his eyes on his plate. The food tasted thick and flat in his mouth and he felt his heart thudding against the wall of his chest. Last day. This is the last day. It felt like a silly, dangerous plan.

“You’d better eat,” he told his wife.

She sat down and began to eat mechanically, without enthusiasm. Suddenly the door buzzer sounded. The eating utensil skidded out of her nerveless fingers and clattered on the floor. He reached out quickly and put his hand on hers.

“All right, darling,” he said. “It’s all right.” He turned to the children. “Go answer the door,” he told

them.

“Both of us?” his daughter asked.

“Both of you.”

“But...”

“Do as I say.”

They slid off their chairs and left the room, glancing back at their parents.

When the sliding door shut off their view, he turned back to his wife. Her face was pale and tight; she had her lip's pressed together.

“Darling, please,” he said. “Please. You know I wouldn't take you if I wasn't sure it was safe. You know how many times I've flown the ship before. And I know just where we're going. It's safe. Believe me, it's safe.”

SHE pressed his hand against her cheek. She closed her eyes and large tears ran out under her lids and down her cheeks.

“It's not that so m-much,” she said. “It's just... leaving, never coming back. We've been here all our lives. It isn't like... like moving. We can't come back. Ever.”

“Listen, darling,” his voice was tense and hurried, “you know as well as I do. In a matter of years, maybe less, there's going to be another war, a terrible one. There won't be a thing left. We have to leave. For our children, for ourselves...”

He paused, testing the words in his mind.

“For the future of life itself,” he finished weakly. He was sorry he said it. Early on a prosaic morning, over everyday food, that kind of talk didn't sound right. Even if it was true.

“Just don't be afraid,” he said. “We'll be all right.”

She squeezed his hand.

“I know,” she said quietly. “I know.”

There were footsteps coming toward them. He pulled out a tissue and gave it to her. She hastily dabbed at her face.

The door slid open. The neighbors and their son and daughter came in. The children were excited. They had trouble keeping it down.

“Good morning,” the neighbor said.

The neighbor's wife went to his wife and the two of them went over by the window and talked in low voices. The children stood around, fidgeted, and looked nervously at each other.

“You've eaten?” he asked his neighbor.

“Yes,” his neighbor said. “Don't you think we'd better be going?”

“I suppose so,” he said.

They left all the dishes on the table. His wife went upstairs and got outer garments for the family.

He and his wife stayed on the porch a moment while the rest went out to the ground car.

“Should we lock the door?” he asked.

She smiled helplessly and ran a hand through her hair. She shrugged helplessly. “Does it matter?”

He locked the door and followed her down the walk. She turned as he came up to her.

“It’s a nice house,” she murmured.

“Don’t think about it,” he said.

They turned their backs on their home and got in the ground car.

“Did you lock it?” asked the neighbor.

“Yes.”

The neighbor smiled wryly. “So did we,” he said. “I tried not to, but then I had to go back.”

They moved through the quiet streets. The edges of the sky were beginning to redden. The neighbor’s wife and the four children were in back. His wife and the neighbor were in front with him.

“Going to be a nice day,” said his neighbor.

“I suppose so,” he said.

“Have you told your children?” the neighbor asked softly.

“Of course not.”

“I haven’t, I haven’t,” insisted his neighbor. “I was just asking.”

“Oh.”

They rode in silence a while.

“Do you ever get the feeling that we’re . . . running out?” asked the neighbor.

He tightened. “No,” he said. “No! We’re the ones who were run out on—all of us.”

“I guess it’s better not to talk about it,” his neighbor said hastily.

“Much better,” he said.

As they drove up to the guardhouse at the gate, he turned to the back.

“Remember,” he said, “not a word from any of you.”

THE guard, sleepy and not caring much, recognized him right away as the chief test pilot for the new ship. That was enough. The family was coming down to watch him off, he told the guard. No objection. The guard let them drive to the ship’s platform.

The car stopped under the huge columns. They all got out and stared up.

Far above them, its nose pointed toward the sky, the great metal ship was just beginning to reflect the early morning glow.

“Let’s go,” he said. “Quickly.”

As they hurried toward the ship’s elevator, he stopped for a moment to look back. The guard house looked deserted. He looked around at everything and tried to fix it all in his memory.

He bent over and picked up some dirt. He put it in his pocket.

“Good-bye,” he whispered.

He ran to the elevator.

The doors shut in front of them. There was no sound in the rising cubicle but the hum of the motor and a few self-conscious coughs from the children. He looked down at them. To have to leave so young, he thought, unable to help.

He closed his eyes. His wife’s hand rested on his arm. He looked at her. Their eyes met and she smiled at him.

“And I thought it would be difficult,” she whispered.

The elevator shuddered to a stop. The doors slid open and they went out. It was getting lighter. He hurried them along the enclosed platform.

They all climbed through the narrow doorway in the ship’s side. He hesitated before following them. He wanted to say something fitting the moment. It burned in him to say something fitting the moment. There wasn’t a thing to say.

HE SWUNG in and grunted as he pulled the door shut and turned the wheel tight.

“That’s it,” he said. “Come on, everybody.”

Their footsteps echoed on the metal decks and ladders as they went up to the control room.

The children ran to the ports and looked out. They gasped when they saw how high they were. Their mothers stood behind them, looking down at the ground. Their eyes were frightened. The children’s were not.

“So high,” said his daughter.

He patted her head gently. “So high,” he repeated.

Then he, turned abruptly and went over to the instrument panel. He stood there, hesitantly. He heard someone come up behind him.

“Shouldn’t we tell the children?” asked his wife. “Shouldn’t we let them know it’s their last look?”

“Go ahead,” he said.

He waited to hear her footsteps. There were none. He turned. She kissed him on the cheek. Then she went to tell the children.

He threw over the switch. Deep in the belly of the ship, a spark ignited the fuel. A concentrated rush of gas flooded from the vents. The bulkheads began to shake.

He heard his daughter crying. He tried not to listen, extended a trembling hand toward the lever, then glanced back suddenly. They were all staring at him. He put his hand on the lever and threw it over.

The ship quivered a brief second and then they felt it rush along the smooth incline. It flashed into the air, faster and faster. They all heard the wind rushing past.

He watched the children turn to the ports and look out again.

“Good-bye,” they said.

He sank down wearily at the control panel. Out of the corner of his eye he saw his neighbor sit down next to him.

“You know just where we’re going?” his neighbor asked.

“On that chart there.”

His neighbor looked at the chart. His eyebrows wiggled in surprise.

“Another solar system?”

“That’s right. There’s a planet there with an oxygen atmosphere that can support our kind of life. We’ll probably have it all to ourselves. No hatred. No war.”

“We’ll be safe,” his neighbor said. “And the race will be safe.”

He nodded and looked back at his and his neighbor’s family. They were still staring out the ports.

“I said,” his neighbor repeated, “which one of these planets is it?”

He leaned over the chart, pointed. “That small one there,” he said.

“This one, third from the sun?”

“That’s right,” he said. “The green planet with the single moon.”

The End.

Notes and proofing history

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This story has been reprinted many times and is the title piece of one of Matheson's major short story collections.