RAY BRADBURY
TOMORROW MIDNIGHT
Eight famous stories of wonder and adventure by the king of Science Fiction.

ILLUSTRATED IN COMIC BOOK FORM.
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A voyage to the farthest reaches of space—in a ship that will never leave Earth...

A sleepy Ohio town, perfectly preserved—on Mars...

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Selecting from the many hundreds of his published stories, the King of Science Fiction presents eight of his all-time favorites, stories of the wonder and mystery of the days to come...

*Illustrated in comic-book style!*
TOMORROW MIDNIGHT

Ray Bradbury

Adapted for E.C. Comics by
Albert B. Feldstein

Illustrated by

Will Elder • Wally Wood • Joe Orlando •
Al Williamson • Jack Kamen • John Severin

BALLANTINE BOOKS • NEW YORK
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Printed in the United States of America

First Ballantine Printing JUNE 1966
INTRODUCTION

If you went down into my cellar you would find not mushrooms but old Sunday panels of *Prince Valiant*, 27 years of them, neatly put away.

If you went up into my attic you would find an entire run of *Tarzan* color comics from the year 1932 on up through 1937, along with daily strips from the same years.

Somewhere in between, here and there about the house, you would find Big Little Books and nice editions of *Mutt and Jeff* and *Krazy Kat* and *Popeye* from the early Depression years. Very late in the day, these are being rediscovered by my four daughters as if they were freshly born.

As you can see, my home has always been a cartoon-oriented home. I still pleasure myself daily with *B.C.*, *Pogo*, *Li’l Abner*, and *Peanuts*. Someday, I would like to have the leisure time to write my own Sunday panel and have it drawn completely by my dear friend Joe Mognaini who has painted the jacket illustrations for many of my books. But that is some time off in the future. Right now, you hold in your hands a copy of *Tomorrow Midnight*, stories of mine adapted into comic-strip form by Al Feldstein and well done—in some cases superbly done—by the old E. C. Comics illustrators. It goes almost without saying how pleased I am to have this second
volume available, along with *The Autumn People*.

As for the stories themselves, each was written to express a certain hope or lay the ghost of a personal nightmare. More often then not, in much of my fiction, I have had the good fun of scaring myself, which means I take joy in passing on the scare to someone like yourself. Older people who don’t understand this have truly forgotten an original truth about boys and boys-become-men. One of the reasons we go into Space is to lose ourselves again, know magic, plumb mystery, ride high, be glorious, and have the heck frightened out of us. And we will be frightened not only by other worlds and creatures on those worlds, but by ourselves. We are still the greatest mystery and we shall spend several million more years trying to figure ourselves out.

These stories then, are ways of figuring a part of myself, which means also a part of you, since we all run in the same human race together. I hope you like them. I hope we may do more work like this together in the coming years. I don’t really believe the future is as dark as I sometimes paint it. I only show you *Tomorrow Midnight* so that you may think hard, work well, and survive happily into the Day After Tomorrow’s Noon.

*October 25th, 1965*

*Los Angeles, Calif.*

Ray Bradbury
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TOMORROW MIDNIGHT
PUNISHMENT WITHOUT CRIME
GEORGE HILL LAY ON THE BLUE VELVET COT IN THE WAITING ROOM OF MARIONETTES, INC. HE MURMURED...

KATHERINE, I DIDN'T WANT TO COME HERE. YOU FORCED ME INTO IT. YOU MADE ME DO IT. GOD, I WISH I WASN'T HERE. I WISH I COULD GO BACK. I DON'T WANT TO KILL YOU...

AFTER A WHILE, GEORGE HILL SLEPT...
He dreamed he was forty-one again, he and Katie sitting on a green hill somewhere with a picnic lunch, their helicopter beside them. The wind blew Katie's hair in golden strands and she was laughing...

Other scenes. Quick changes of color: Greece, Italy, Switzerland, in that clear, long autumn of 1997. And then... Nightmare. Katie and Leonard Phelps...

Gasp...

Katie and Leonard in a green park outside the city. George himself appearing on a path in time to see...

They kissed and held hands, not eating...
George cried out in his sleep. How had it happened? Where had Phelps sprung from? Why had he interfered? The rage, the struggle, the attempt to kill Leonard Phelps...

George Hill awoke, weeping. He rose clumsily. He saw himself in the waiting-room mirror, and he looked all fifty of his years. It had been a wretched error. Better men than he had taken young wives only to have them dissolve away like sugar crystals in water. He eyed himself, monstrously. A little too much stomach, a little too much chin...

Mr. Hill, we're ready for you now!

Huh? Oh... Yes...
THE DARK MAN LED HIM TO A ROOM... WHY THIS IS KATIE'S ROOM.

WE TRY TO HAVE EVERYTHING PERFECT, MR. HILL, YOU STILL WANT TO GO THROUGH WITH IT? YOU KNOW THIS IS ILLEGAL...

...THAT WE ARE IN NO WAY RESPONSIBLE FOR WHAT HAPPENS TO YOU AS A RESULT OF THIS REQUEST.

YES. YES! FOR GOD'S SAKE! YOU'VE KEPT ME LONG ENOUGH! LET'S GET ON WITH IT!

GEORGE DREW FORTH A SIGNED CHECK FOR TEN THOUSAND DOLLARS. THE DARK MAN HANDED HIM A RELEASE...

SIGN HERE...

GEORGE SIGNED THE MAN DEPARTED...
The room was silent. George felt for the gun in his pocket. A lot of money. But rich men can afford the luxury of cathartic murder. The violent unviolence. The death without death. The murder without murdering. He was suddenly calm...

He watched the door. This was a thing he had anticipated for six months, and now it was to be ended. In a moment, the beautiful robot, the stringless marionette, the replica of Katie would appear, and...

Hello, George. Katie...!
He whirled. He let out his breath. She stood behind him. She was dressed in a feather-soft green gown. Her hair was bright about her throat and her eyes were blue and clear...

You're... how else could I be, George?

His voice was slow and unreal. His heart pounded sluggishly. He moved forward as if walking under a deep pressure of water.

Let me look at you. Haven't you seen enough of me in all these years?

Never enough...

He walked around and around her, touching her. His eyes filled with tears...

What did you want to talk to me about, George?
HE SAT DOWN WEAKLY. HE BLINKED...

IT'S INCREDIBLE. SCIENCE. BUT WE'RE NOT ALLOWED TO TALK OF THAT. IT SPOILS THE ILLUSION. COME TO BUSINESS...

HER FINGERNAILS WERE PERFECT AS SEASHELLS. THERE WERE NO SEAMS, NO FLAWS. HE LOOKED UPON HER. HE WANTED TO KISS HER LIPS...

GIVE ME TIME. I'LL GET TO IT!

YOU WANTED TO TALK TO ME ABOUT LEONARD, DIDN'T YOU, GEORGE? YOU KNOW I SPEND ALL MY TIME WITH HIM NOW.
HE KNEW NO ANGER. IT HAD WASHED OUT OF HIM AT
HER APPEARANCE. HE FELT CHILDISHLY DIRTY...

YOU'RE NOT GUILTY. YOU'RE
NOT. YOU'RE FRESH. YOU'RE
NOT HER. SHE'S GUILTY!
NOT YOU! YOU'RE DIFFERENT!

ON THE CONTRARY! I AM HER. I CAN
ACT ONLY AS SHE ACTS. NO PART OF
ME IS ALIEN TO HER. I DID ALL
THOSE THINGS. I KISSED HIM. I...

NO! YOU CAN'T
HAVE. YOU'RE
JUST BORN.
LOOK. ISN'T
THERE SOME WAY?
CAN'T I... PAY MORE
MONEY? TAKE YOU
AWAY WITH ME? I
DON'T WANT TO KILL
YOU!

I'M GOING TO SEE LEONARD
TONIGHT, GEORGE. WE'RE
FLYING TO PARIS IN THE
MORNING. AND THEN TO
STOCKHOLM. MY LITTLE
FAT MAN...
Something began to stir in him. His face grew pale. He knew what was happening. The hidden anger and revulsion and hatred in him was sending out thought impulses, the Marionette, the invisible strings. He was manipulating her body, the delicate telepathic web in her wonderous head was receiving his death thoughts...

Plump, odd little man who once was so fair.

Don't, Katie! Don't!

Old, while I am only twenty seven. Ah, George, you were blind... working all these years to give me time to fall in love again. Don't you think Leonard is lovely?

Stop it, Katie. For God's sake.

He drew the gun.
SHE KEPT AT HIM...
I LOVE HIM, GEORGE. I LOVE HIM...
KATIE... DON'T...

HE RAISED THE GUN BLINDLY...
I LOVE HIM...
KATIE...

HE FIRED. SHE FELL...
I LOVE HIM...
KATIE, KATIE, KATIE...
Four times he pumped bullets into her body...

I... love... him...

I... love... him...

No! No!

George Hill dropped to the floor. The last thing he remembered was feeling the real blood pouring upon his hands in a freshet...

Katie... sob... Katie...

She lay shuddering. Her senseless mouth clicked wide and some insanely warped mechanism had her repeat it again and again...

And then he fainted...
He awakened to a cool cloth on his brow. The dark man stood over him, cleaning the blood from his hands...

It's all over, Mr. Hill!

George got up. He stared at his washed hands that had been covered with blood...

I've got to leave. I'll go to Paris now... start over. I'm not to try to phone Katie or anything, am I?

Katie is dead.

Yes, I killed her, didn't I? God! The blood! It was real!

We are proud of that touch...
THE ANGER AND THE DESTRUCTION WERE PURGED AWAY. THE MEMORY WAS SO TERRIBLE THAT HE WOULD NEVER KILL AGAIN. SHE WAS DEAD NOW. HE HAD HAD HIS WAY. HE WENT DOWN IN THE ELEVATOR AND OUT INTO THE STREET...

HE STOPPED AT THE CURB AND WATCHED THE TRAFFIC FLASH BY. HE TOOK DEEP BREATHS OF THE GOOD AIR AND BEGAN TO RELAX...

IT WAS RAINING.
A HANDCUFF WAS SNAPPED ON GEORGE HILL'S WRIST...
YOU'RE UNDER ARREST, MR. HILL. ALL RIGHT, SMITH. GO UPSTAIRS AND GET THE OTHERS...

BUT, YOU CAN'T DO THIS TO ME!

FOR MURDER, MR. HILL?
OH, YES WE CAN!

THUNDER SOUNDED IN THE SKY...
IT HAD BEEN RAINING FOR TEN DAYS. IT RAINED NOW ON THE PRISON WALLS. GEORGE HILL PUT HIS HANDS OUT OF THE BARRED WINDOW TO FEEL THE DROPS GATHER IN POOLS ON HIS TREMBLING PALMS. HIS LAWYER LOOKED UP AT HIM...

SHE WASN'T REAL. I DIDN'T KILL HER. AND TONIGHT, I'M TO BE EXECUTED.

IT'S THE LAW. THE OTHERS ARE SENTENCED, TOO. THE PRESIDENT OF MARIONETTES, INC. WILL DIE AT MIDNIGHT. HIS ASSISTANT WILL DIE AT ONE. YOU... AT ABOUT ONE-THIRTY...

GEORGE HILL TURNED, LISTENING TO THE RAIN... THANKS. YOU DID ALL YOU COULD. I GUESS IT WAS MURDER, NO MATTER HOW YOU LOOK AT IT. THE IDEA WAS THERE... THE PLOT AND THE PLAN. IT LACKED ONLY THE REAL KATIE HERSELF.

TEN YEARS AGO, YOU WOULDN'T HAVE RECEIVED THE DEATH PENALTY. MAYBE TEN YEARS FROM NOW YOU WOULDN'T EITHER. BUT THE USE OF MARIONETTES HAS GROWN SO IN THE LAST YEAR, THEY HAD TO HAVE A WHIPPING BOY TO SCARE THE PUBLIC OUT OF IT!
GOD KNOWS WHERE IT WOULD ALL WIND UP IF IT WENT ON. THERE'S THE SPIRITUAL SIDE OF IT, TOO... WHERE DOES LIFE BEGIN OR END? ARE ROBOTS ALIVE OR DEAD? IF THEY AREN'T ALIVE, THEY'RE THE NEXT THING TO IT. THEY REACT. THEY THINK.

THE GOVERNMENT'S RIGHT. I SEE THAT NOW. THEY CAN'T LET MURDER BE LEGAL, EVEN IF IT IS DONE WITH MACHINES AND TELEPATHY AND WAX...

I'M GLAD YOU UNDERSTAND THE ATTITUDE OF THE LAW, GEORGE! THEY'D BE HYPOCRITES TO LET ME GET AWAY WITH MY CRIME. I'VE FELT GUILTY ABOUT IT EVER SINCE. I'VE FELT THE NEED OF PUNISHMENT. ISN'T THAT ODD?
I have to go now, George.

That's how society gets to you. It makes you feel guilty even when you see no reason to be...

Goodbye, George.

Goodbye...

George Hill stood staring out of the little barred window. A red light burned in the wall suddenly. A voice came over the audio...

Mr. Hill. Your wife is here to see you!

She's dead...

The lawyer left...
MR. HILL. YOUR WIFE IS WAITING IN THE ANTEROOM. WILL YOU SEE HER?

SHE'S DEAD. I KILLED HER. I SHOT HER. I SAW HER FALL...

MR. HILL. DO YOU HEAR ME? SHE'S DEAD, CAN'T SHE LET ME BE? I KILLED HER, I WON'T SEE HER. SHE'S DEAD!

I HEAR YOU! I HEAR YOU! SHE'S DEAD...

GEORGE POUNDED AT THE WALL OF HIS CELL WITH HIS FISTS. A PAUSE... THEN...

VERY WELL, MR. HILL?

THE RED LIGHT WINKED OFF...
LIGHTNING FLASHED THROUGH THE SKY AND LIT HIS FACE. HE PRESSED HIS HOT CHEEKS TO THE COLD BARS AND WAITED AS THE RAIN FELL. AFTER A WHILE, A DOOR OPENED AND HE SAW TWO FIGURES EMERGE FROM THE PRISON OFFICE BELOW. THEY PASSED UNDER AN ARC LAMP...

KATIE...

IT WAS KATIE. AND BESIDE HER, LEONARD PHELPS...

HER FACE TURNED AWAY. THE MAN TOOK HER ARM. THEY HURRIED AWAY IN THE BLACK RAIN... INTO A WAITING CAR... KATIE! KATIE! SHE'S ALIVE! GUARD! GUARD! I SAW HER! SHE'S NOT DEAD, I DIDN'T KILL HER, NOW YOU CAN LET ME OUT...
HE SCREAMED AND BEAT AND PULLED AT THE BARS.
THE GUARDS CAME RUNNING...
I DIDN'T MURDER ANYONE, IT'S ALL A
JOKE, A MISTAKE, I SAW HER, I SAW
HER. KATIE, COME BACK, TELL
THEM, KATIE, SAY YOU'RE ALIVE,
KATIE... I SAW HER...

THEN LET ME FREE! LET ME FREE!
WE SAW HER TOO,
THIS IS INSANE...
WE'VE BEEN THROUGH ALL
THAT, SIR... AT THE
TRIAL...!

THE CAR DROVE AWAY,
KATIE AND LEONARD IN-
SIDE... DROVE AWAY TO
PARIS AND ATHENS AND
LONDON NEXT SPRING
AND VIENNA IN THE
FALL... KATIE! COME
BACK! YOU CAN'T DO
THIS TO ME!

BEHIND HIM, THE GUARDS
MOVED FORWARD TO TAKE
HOLD OF GEORGE HILL
WHILE HE SCREAMED.

HE LEAPED UP AND CLAWED
AT THE BARS, BELLLOWING...
At the rate things are coming and going, it'll take a few hundred years to break me down into rust and corrosion... maybe longer. In the meantime, I'll have many days and nights to think it over. You can't stop atoms from revolving and humming their life-orbits inside metal. That's how metal lives its own special life. That's how metal thinks. Where I lie is a barren, pebbled plateau, with pale, weedy growths and a few hunched trees coming up out of planetoid rock. There's a wind comes over the plateau every morning. There's rain comes in the twilight, and a silence comes down even closer in the night. That's my whole life, now... lying here with my jets twisted and my fore-plates bashed...
BUT WHILE I'M RUSTING AND WONDERING, I CAN THINK IT ALL OVER...
HOW I CAME TO BE HERE, HOW I CAME TO BE BUILT...
I was a war rocket. My birth-period, and the base where I was integrated... skeleton, skin, and innards... went through the usual birth-pains. It is a dim portion in my memory, but when the final hull was melted to me, the awareness was there. A metal awareness. I could think, but tell nobody that I thought...

Fore and aft they placed their space-artillery nozzles, and weighted me with scarlet ammunition. I began to feel my purpose, expectantly, perhaps a bit impatiently. Men hustled in and out of me with small rubber-tired trucks bearing explosives. The munitions-lieutenant prodded them...

Hurry it up! Hurry it up! Skip! We've got a war to meet.
Then there was some fancy business about a christening. Some official's daughter crashed a bottle of foaming liquor on my prow. A few reporters flicked their cameras. And a small crowd put up their hands, waved them, and put them down, as if they realized how stupid it really was wasting that fine champagne...

And then I saw the captain, metal bless him, for the first time. He came running across the field, the master of my fate... the captain of my soul. I liked him right off. He stomped aboard and cracked out orders...

Snap it! Get rid of that dame, and those reporters out there. Clear the apron! Seal the locks! Clamp ports! We're pushing the blazes out of here!
They rapped me tight. They expelled the crowd. Sirens shouted across the base apron. The crew did things to my alimentary canal. The captain shouted. That was the slap on my back that brought me my first breath, my first sound, my first movement. My captain pounded me into living...

I threw out wings of fire and smoke. Suddenly I wasn't metal lying in the sun any more. I was the biggest darn bird that ever sang into the sky. Maybe my voice wasn't anything but thunder, but it was still singing to me. I sang loud and I sang long...

It was the first time I'd seen the world. I was surprised to find that it was round...
Yes, I liked my captain. His name was Lamb... ironic for a man lacking Lamb-like qualities. Captain Lamb sat in my control room, cracking his knuckles...

The young man named Conrad sat beside the captain at the duo-controls...

We'd better. There's a girl waiting in Yorkport for us to come back.

US! Both of you? You and Hillary? The two of us. Both on the same war-rocket. At least I can keep my eye on him. I'll know he's not down there scudding along on my acceleration...

Space is a funny place to talk about love. It's like laughing out loud in a big cathedral... trying to make a waltz out of a hymn.
They were part of me... Lamb and Conrad and the crew. Like blood corpuscles pulsing in the arteries of a warm body. And like any body, there were microbes too. Destroying elements. Their names were Larion and Belloc...

Now as far as killing Lamb goes... that's out! Then we're only two against the rest. I want to hit the engines, Eh, Larion? We're guaranteed...

A well-placed time-bomb should work miracles with the main jet-engine. And when it happens, we can be out and away in space in plenty of time.

Seems a shame. Nice new rocket, never tested before. And it all goes boom before it has proven itself...

Don't get sentimental, Belloc. You're getting paid for it. Now here's the plan. There's a certain amount of confusion during the shift change-over. Half the crew's goggy. The other half's too tired to worry. Now, during the next change-over, we'll...
Self-preservation is an all-encompassing thing. You find it in metal as you find it in men. My body was to be attacked. From outside I feared nothing. From inside, I was uncertain. I didn't approve of the idea...

Larion. Belloc. Going below? Right, sir. C'mon, Belloc. I'll be down in thirty minutes. We'll check the auxiliaries together.

Larion and Belloc went below to their stations. The change-over proceeded. The poison was in my heart... waiting...

Did you check the lifeboats, Belloc? Number three boat's ready to go. Let's get this over with...
Mars came up ahead like a ruddy drop of dried blood. The war I'd never seen but always heard about was out there. I wanted to be part of it. I wanted to get there with Lamb and Hillary and Conrad and the others. Larion climbing rungs, on his way to get the time-bomb, Belloc, waiting below. Time getting shorter... shorter...

I thought about Captain Lamb and the way he barked orders, about Hillary and Conrad thinking about a woman's lips, about Belloc, waiting. And suddenly... there was a hiss, an explosion...

What in...! Good Lord! What was that?

Somebody screamed. I knew who it was and where it was and what it was...
WARNING BELLS CLAMORED THROUGH ME. CONRAD SCUTTLED DOWN THE RUNGS, YELLING. HE VANISHED TOWARD THE ENGINE ROOM...

HILLARY GRABBED THE SHIP’S CONTROLS AND FROZE THEM, LISTENING AND WAITING. HE SAID ONE WORD...

IT’S DOWN THERE...

ALICE...

THE CAPTAIN GOT THERE FIRST. HE TOOK ONE LOOK AND SCREAMED...

CUT THE FEED VALVE... FOR GOD’S SAKE!
CONRAD GRASPED A VALVE-WHEEL GLINTING ON THE WALL, TwISTING IT, GRUNTING. THE LOUD GUSHING NOISE STOPPED. STEAM-CLOUDS BILLowed IN MY HEART, WRAPPING CAPTAIN LAMb AND THE OTHERS TIGHT... MAKING THEM COUGH...

MY VACUUM VENTILATORS BEGAN HUMMING, CLEARING THE STEAM. THEY SAW BELLOC, LYING THERE. HE SAID NOT A WORD TO ANYBODY. HE JUST BLED WHERE THE EXPLODED OIL-PIPE HAD CAUGHT HIM ON THE NOSE AND CHEEK AND PLUNGED ON BACK INTO HIS BRAIN...

I...I CAN'T UNDERSTAND IT. I CHECKED THOSE OIL-LINES THIS MORNING. THEY WERE OKAY! I DON'T SEE...
Footsteps on the rungs. Larion came down. He looked as if somebody'd kicked him in the stomach when he saw Belloc lying there. His face sucked bone-white, staring. His jaw dropped...

You...you killed him! You found out... found out what we were going to do and you killed him. Well, I'll show you...

Larion began to laugh. He darted about suddenly and leaped up the ladder rungs...

I'll show you...

Stop him...
CONRAD RUSHED UP THE LADDER AT LARION'S HEELS. CAPTAIN LAMB WATCHED THEM GO, LISTENING TO THE FADING FEET ON THE RUNGS, GOING UP AND UP...

WATCH IT...

A FEW MINUTES LATER, CONRAD CAME BACK DOWN THE LADDER. HE HELD UP THE TIME-BOMB...

IT'S A GOOD THING THAT OIL-PIPE BURST, CAP. LARION TRIED TO HIDE THIS IN SUPPLY. IT'S A BOMB. HE AND BELLOC...

WHAT ABOUT LARION?

HE TRIED TO ESCAPE THROUGH AN EMERGENCY LIFE-BOAT AIR-LOCK. THE FOOL WAS IN TOO MUCH OF A HURRY. HE OPENED THE OUTER DOOR TOO SOON AND WAS SUCKED OUT INTO SPACE. HE'S GONE FOR GOOD...
The captain looked puzzled...

That's funny. He knew how those air locks work. He wouldn't have made such a stupid mistake. It... It must have been an accident... or... or... something else!

My body was cleansed. The organic poison was eliminated. Mars was very close now. Red. Bright red. In another six hours we would be engaged in combat...
I had my taste of war. We drove down, Captain Lamb and the men inside me, and I put out my arms for the first time, and I closed my fingers of power around Martian ships... fifteen of them...

I screamed. I talked to the stars. I dissected Martian rockets with quick calm strokes of my Ray-Arms. And spunky little Cap Lamb guided my vitals, swearing at the top of his lungs...

Let's go, you dirty @#$?!$! Let's knock 'em out of the universe!
ONE DAY CONRAD COLLAPSED UPON THE CONTROL DECK
WITH A SHARD OF SHRAPNEL WEBBED IN HIS LUNGS...

AND IT WAS HILLARY WHO TOOK THE NEWS BACK TO
YORK PORT, TO THE GIRL THEY BOTH LOVED...

AND OTHERS OF THE CREW DIED WITHIN ME, THEIR
BLOOD SPILLING OUT UPON MY DECK PLATES, WARM
AND THICK. SLOP, THE COOK. AYRES, THE NAVIGATOR...
The crew muttered, shifting their feet... it's been good. I won't deny it. I had a fine crew and a sweet ship. We worked hard. We did what we had to do. And now it's all over. We have peace.

Peace. It means getting drunk again... living on Earth again. It means forgetting how free-fall feels on your guts. It means losing friends. And it means leaving this rocket...
WE LANDED IN YORK PORT WITHOUT FANFARE. THE CREW PACKED THEIR DUFFLE BAGS AND LEFT. CAPTAIN LAMB LINGERED AWHILE, WALKING THROUGH ME, SWEARING UNDER HIS BREATH...

I WASN'T A WAR-ROCKET ANYMORE. THEY CRAMMED ME WITH CARGO AND SHIPPED ME BACK AND FORTH TO VENUS FOR THE NEXT FIVE YEARS. I HAD A NEW CAPTAIN AND A STRANGE CREW AND A STRANGE PEACEFUL ROUTINE COMING AND GOING ACROSS THE STARS...

...AND AFTER A WHILE, HE LEFT TOO...
Nothing important happened until July 17th, 2243. That was the day I cracked up on this wild, pebbled, little planetoid where the wind whined and the rain poured and the silence was so very silent...

A rocket thinks in itself, but it lives through its crew and its captain. I'd been living on borrowed time since Captain Lamb went away and never came back. I lay there thinking about it all... helpless... like a gigantic metal child, an idiot who needs control... who needs pulsing human, life-blood...
Until one day, after the rain, I saw a silver speck in the sky... A ship. It came down a hundred yards from my silent hulk. A man climbed out. He came walking up the pebbled hill. He stood in my air-lock door and I heard him say...

Hello!

...and I knew who it was...

Captain Lamb. 'After all these years...

I heard you were lost four months ago. I thought I'd hunt you up myself, just for old times' sake...

He climbed the rungs to my control room and stood there, swaying, remembering all the old times we had together...

Hillary! Conrad! Ayres! Slop! Where in blazes is everybody? Where in God-blamed... choke...
Silence. He quit yelling for people who couldn't answer him. He sat down in the control chair... talked to me...

Things are turning bad on Venus. Colonials revolting. You're old-fashioned, but you're proud and tall, and a fighter! You can fight again! So help me God, I'll be captain of you again...

And so I've been lying here, waiting for the repair crew to come, waiting with a stirring of my old anticipation. I've been dead a while, and Cap Lamb has showed up to slap me back to life. They'll go over me from seam to seam... and someday soon, Cap Lamb will stomp into my air lock and shout...

**Snap it! Clear the apron! Seal the locks! Clamp ports. We're pushing the blazes out of here!**

...and I'll be living and breathing and moving again... off to war again! Off to war...

The End
We were just a lot of kids. With cut fingers, lumpy heads and whining tenor voices. We liked our game of mibs as well as the next rumple-hair; but we liked the rockets more!

King of the Grey Spaces!
I quit breathing. I didn't suck another breath until the ship was out on the field, dragged there by chugging tractors, and followed by a lot of little bug-like mechanics in asbestos suits and fireproof visors. Every line was like perfect steel muscles sleeping there, ready to wake up with a roar, jump up and hit its silly head against the Milky Way's ceiling, and make the stars fall down like frightened confetti. You felt it could do that, kick the universe right in the belly and tell it to get out of the way...
It was something to 'good lord' about. It was a hundred years of dreaming all sorted out and chosen and put together to make the hardest, prettiest, swiftest dream of all. It got me in the stomach, too... It got a steel grip there that made me sick with longing and envy. And when the pilots strolled onto the field, my feet walked with them...

Gosh, what I wouldn't give to go with them. What I wouldn't give.

And then the preliminaries got over with. The fuel was in the rocket and the men ran away from it on the ground like ants running lickety from a metal god...
...And the dream woke up and gave a yell and jumped into the sky...

...And then it was gone, all the vacuum shouting of it, leaving nothing but a trembling in the air and through the ground, and up our legs to our fourteen year old hearts...

I... I want to grow up quick. I want to grow up quick so I can take that rocket.

I bit my lips. I was so darned young, and you cannot apply for space work. You have to be chosen... Chosen...

C'mon! Let's go to the television show now! Yeah! C'mon! You guys go ahead...
The other kids went off laughing breathlessly, talking, and left Priory and me there to look at the spot where the ship had been. The other kids were okay. They loved the rockets, too. But I had the feeling that they wouldn’t be doing what Ralph Priory and I would do someday. Ralph and I wanted the stars for each of us, more than we wanted a fistful of blue-white clear-cut diamonds...

It spoiled everything else for us... that takeoff. Because of it, I flunked my semantics test on Monday. But I didn’t care. It got so bad, I had to use sleep-massage mechs every night to get my eyelids sealed. Then, my teacher spoke to me...

Look here, Christopher. If this keeps up, I’ll have you reclassified at the next psych-board meeting!

I’m... sorry, sir.
He looked hard at me...

What sort of blocking have you got? It must be a very simple one and also a conscious one.

It's conscious, sir; but it's not simple. It's multi-tentacular. It's the... Rockets?

He picked up a small tab of records with my name blocked on them. He flipped through it. I had a funny stone in my stomach, just lying there...

Rockets, eh? Well, we can't let it interfere with your scholastic record, young man. Hmmm! You know, Christopher, you're king-of-the-hill here; you're head of the class. We'll have to see about this...

Yes, sir!
RALPH PRIORY AND I SLID HOME FROM FORMULA-SCHOOL TOGETHER THAT AFTERNOON. I TOLD HIM WHAT HAD HAPPENED...

I TRIED TO GET BACK TO WORK, BUT I COULDN'T. DURING THE REST OF THE DAY, THE TEACHER KEPT LOOKING AT ME AND LOOKING AT MY RECORD AND CHEWING HIS LIP. THEN HE MADE AN AUDIO-CALL...

I COULDN'T HEAR A WORD. BUT WHEN HE SET THE AUDIO IN ITS CRADLE, HE STARED AT ME WITH THE FUNNIEST LOOK IN HIS EYES.

WHAT'D HE SAY, CHRIS?

YOU...YOU DON'T THINK YOU'LL BE SENT AWAY, DO YOU, CHRIS? THAT WOULD BE PLAIN DIRTY!

MAYBE I NEED A GOOD MENTAL GOING OVER, RALPH. I CAN'T GO ON FLUBBING MY STUDIES THIS WAY.

WE'LL STICK IT TOGETHER, CHRIS. DARN THEM, THEY CAN'T TAKE YOU AWAY NOW. WE'RE PALS. IT WOULDN'T BE FAIR.
WE STOPPED OUTSIDE MY HOUSE AND LOOKED AT THE SKY FOR A LONG MOMENT...

THE STARS AREN'T OUT IN THE DAYTIME, BUT WE CAN SEE 'EM, CAN'T WE, CHRIS?

YEAH! DARN RIGHT... WE CAN...

WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH YOUR EYES, CHRIS?

AW... I LOOKED AT THE SUN TOO LONG. COME ON INSIDE, RALPH.
WE YELLED UNDER THE SHOWER SPRAY IN THE BATH-CUBICLE. BUT OUR YELLS WEREN'T ESPECIALLY CONVINCING, EVEN WHEN WE TURNED ON THE ICE-WATER. AND LATER WHILE WE WERE STANDING IN THE WARM-AIR DRYER, I LOOKED AT RALPH...

SOMEHOW I THINK THE OTHER KIDS'LL GROW OUT OF IT. BUT I DON'T THINK WE WILL, RALPH. I THINK WE'LL KEEP WAITING.

CHRIS, THE INTERPLANET PATROL SELECTS. YOU CAN'T APPLY. YOU WAIT!

WE ZIPPED ON OUR JHAMS...

I YOU WAIT FROM THE TIME YOU'RE OLD ENOUGH TO TURN COLD IN THE STOMACH WHEN YOU SEE A MOON ROCKET, UNTIL ALL THE YEARS GO BY... AND EVERY MONTH THAT PASSES, YOU HOPE THAT ONE MORNING A BLUE PATROL GLIDER WILL COME DOWN OUT OF THE SKY, LANDING ON YOUR LAWN, AND THAT A NEAT LOOKING ENGINEER WILL EASE OUT, WALK UP THE RAMPWAY BRISKLY, AND TOUCH THE BELL...
Ralph's face darkened... You keep waiting for that patrol glider until you're twenty-one. And then on the last day of your twentieth year, you get good and drunk and laugh a lot and say what the heck, you didn't care about it anyway.

We both just sat there, deep in the middle of his words...

I... I don't want that disappointment, Chris. I'm fourteen, just like you. But if I reach my twenty-first year without anyone of the patrol touching the bell at the ortho-station, I'll...

I know, Ralph. I've talked to men who've waited and dreamed and prayed.

And if it happens that way, Ralph, well... we'll get good and drunk together and then go out and take jobs loading cargo...

Loading cargo... Hello, Chris... Ralph...
IT WAS MY MOTHER. SHE DIDN'T LOOK MUCH OLDER THAN TWENTY-FIVE, FOR HAVING RAISED ME AND WORKED IN THE GOVERNMENT STATISTICS OFFICE. SHE WAS LIGHT AND GRACEFUL AND SMILED A LOT, AND I COULD SEE HOW FATHER MUST HAVE LOVED HER MUCH WHEN HE WAS ALIVE...

YOU LOOK ILL, RALPH. WHAT'S WRONG?

NOTHIN', NOTHIN' AT ALL.

ONE PARENT WAS BETTER THAN NONE. POOR PRIORY. NOW, RAISED IN THE ORTHOPEDICAL STATION...

YOU CAN STAY HERE WITH US TONIGHT, PRIORY. WE WANT YOU. DON'T WE, CHRIS?

HECK, YES! GEE, THANKS! I'LL GO AUDIO IN AND TELL THEM...
When Ralph was gone, Mother looked at me intently and came and sat down next to me. She brushed my hair with a nice little move of her fingers, then she said...

Something's happened, Chris! Something's up somewhere. I had two audio calls at work today. One from your teacher, one from...I can't say. I don't know. I don't want to say until things happen...

Don't tell me, then, Mom. Those calls...

She just looked at me. She took my hands between her two warm ones...

You're so young, Chris. So awfully young. You never knew your father. I wish you had. You know what he was, Chris. He worked in a chem lab, deep underground. He never saw the stars...

My heart yelled in my chest. Yelled loud and hard...
When I woke the next morning, Priory was gone. There was a note pinned on the sliding door. It said...

'See you at Formula Class. Your mom wanted me to do some work for her. She got a call this morning, and said she needed me to help. See you.

Priory"

Priory running errands. A call in the early morning for Mom. Strange. Suddenly I heard the kids down below on the lawn-courts...

'Hey! Hey, Chris! You're right down, fellas! No, Chris.

My mother's voice. It was quiet and it had something funny in it. She was standing in the doorway behind me, her face pale, drawn, full of some small pain

No, Chris. Tell them to go on to Formula without you...today.
I FELT NUMB. I TURNED SLOWLY AND LOOKED DOWN AT THE KIDS...

HEY, CHRIS! C'MON!

SORRY, GANG. GO ON WITHOUT ME. I CAN'T GO TO FORMULA TODAY. SEE YOU LATER, HUH?

THEY MOVED OFF, NOT QUITE AS BOISTEROUSLY. I TURNED TO MOM...

WHY AM I STAYING HOME FROM FORMULA, MOM? WHY DID YOU SEND RALPH AWAY?

CHRIS, PLEASE DON'T ASK. PLEASE DON'T...
Before I could say anything else, there was a sound in the air. It cut through the very soundproofed wall of the house. It came closer. It lowered its pitch and came down. I swallowed. All the fear and uncertainty and doubt went away... instantly.

Mom! Mom! It's a Patrol Car!

I heard footsteps coming up the ramp below. Footsteps that I had waited for a long time. Footsteps I had been afraid would never come. Somebody touched the bell, and I knew who it was...
HE LOOKED AS IF HE HAD BEEN BORN IN HIS UNIFORM. IT FITTED LIKE A SECOND LAYER OF SKIN. AS SIMPLE AND AS PERFECT AS A UNIFORM COULD BE MADE, BUT WITH ALL THE POWER OF THE COSMOS BEHIND IT. HIS NAME WAS TRENT. I STOOD THERE, LISTENING...

...AND DON'T FORGET, MR. CHRISTOPHER, NOBODY IS TO KNOW YOU HAVE BEEN SELECTED BY THE PATROL.

NO ONE, SIR?

NO ONE EXCEPT THOSE WHO KNOW NOW. YOUR MOTHER AND YOUR TEACHER. YOU WANT TO ASK WHY, DON'T YOU? WHY YOU CAN'T TELL IT TO YOUR FRIENDS, BUT YOU'RE AFRAID TO ASK. I'LL EXPLAIN...

WE SELECT ABOUT TWO THOUSAND YOUNG MEN EACH YEAR FROM EARTH'S BILLIONS. OUT OF THAT NUMBER, ONLY HALF WIND UP AS SOLAR ENGINEERS. THE REST MUST RETURN TO SOCIETY.
THEY'VE FLUNKED OUT, BUT THERE'S NO REASON FOR EVERYONE TO KNOW. THEY USUALLY FLUNK OUT, IF THEY'RE GOING TO, IN THE FIRST YEAR. AND IT'S TOUGH TO FACE FRIENDS AND SAY YOU COULDN'T MAKE THE GRADE IN THE BIGGEST JOB OF THE UNIVERSE. SO WE MAKE IT EASY TO GO BACK.

YES, AND THERE'S ANOTHER REASON. HALF THE FUN OF BEING A KID IS BEING ABLE TO LORD IT OVER OTHER KIDS, BY BEING SUPERIOR IN SOME WAY. WE TAKE THAT FUN AWAY, THEN WE'LL KNOW IF YOU WANTED TO GO INTO THE PATROL FOR MERELY EGOTISTIC, GLORY REASONS, OR FOR THE PATROL ITSELF.

IF YOU'RE IN IT FOR PERSONAL CONCEIT... YOU'RE DAMNED, IF YOU'RE IN IT BECAUSE YOU CAN'T HELP IT, AND YOU HAVE TO BE IN IT... YOU'RE BLESSED.

SIR, A QUESTION PLEASE. I HAVE A FRIEND, NAMED RALPH PRIORY. HE'S FROM AN ORTHO-STATION AND...
Trent nodded...

I can't tell you if he's on our lists, or not, Christopher. He's your buddy, isn't he? And you want him along? I can't tell you. I'll look into his record. Station-bred, eh? That's not so good. But...we'll check him.

If you would... please. Thank you...

Saturday morning, then, at nine, Mr. Christopher. No talk. Report at the rocket port to me. Good morning...

Good morning, sir!
HE saluted me and I watched him turn and walk off and I heard the patrol car go up into the sky singing away. Mother was beside me, holding me...

OH, CHRIS. CHRIS...

MOM. HOW... HOW WILL I TELL PRIORY? WHAT ABOUT HIM?

MOTHER was always ahead of my thoughts. She knew what to do all the time...

YOU're going away, Chris. That's all. But, mom, you...

TELL him that. Tell him you need psycho-reorganization. He'll understand.
Yes, I'll be lonely, Chris. But I'll have my work and I'll have priory.

You mean you're taking him from the orthostation?

That's what you wanted me to say, wasn't it, Chris?

That's what I wanted you to say, mom.

He'll be a good son, Chris. Almost as good as you, but not quite.

He'll be fine.
we told ralph how i was going away and how mom wanted him to come live with her. it was funny, but ralph never even asked me why i was going... or where... or for how long. but in the darkness on that last night, just before we fell asleep, he whispered...

You're not waiting any more, are you, Chris? I... I'm awfully tired, Ralph.

that's what i thought. you're not waiting any more. gosh, but that's good, Chris. that's good.

he reached out and pinched me, lightly...
Mom wasn't home on Saturday when it came time to leave. I found a spool of audio film on my bed and inserted it in the viewer. Soft hair... her white face... and the words...

I hate good-byes, Chris. I've gone to the lab to do some extra work. Good luck. All my love. When I see you again... you'll be a man.

Priory walked to the vac-tube with me. We looked at each other and he swallowed...

Chris. I'll be waiting. Just like you waited and don't have to wait any more. I'll wait.

Maybe it won't be long, Priory. I hope not.

That was all. I ran it through four times...

The tube door sealed. I was hurled away to the rocket port, and Priory was left behind.
I stepped out of the tube at the port. It was a five hundred yard walk to the administration building. It took me ten years to walk it. It was all choked up in my heart and it wouldn’t go away, and it swam around in my eyes and it pulled my lips down, hard...

Next time I see you, you’ll be a man...

Don’t tell I’ll wait, Chris any body...

I felt small there...walking, walking, walking...

The afternoon rocket for Venus was just taking off as I went down the ramp to the office. It shivered the ground and it shivered and thrilled my heart.

I was beginning to grow up awfully fast.
I stood watching it until someone snapped their heels, cracked me a salute. I was numb...

C.M. Christopher? Yes, Sir. Reporting, Sir.

This way, Mr. Christopher.

Yes, Sir.

We were just a lot of kids, with cut fingers, lumpy heads and whining tenor voices. We liked our game of Mibs as well as the next rumple-hair...

But we liked the Rockets more!

Mother, Priory. I'll see you again... someday. Mother...Priory...
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 some-
times 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. I
Wait in the cool silence, and there will come a
day when I no longer wait...
Now it is morning. I hear a great thunder. I smell red fire from a distance. I hear metal crashing...

We're down. All right. Send the men out.

I wait. I listen. I hear voices, far away. Alien voices. They speak an alien tongue I cannot know. No word is familiar. I listen...

So this is Mars! Where's the flag? Here you are, sir!
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. AND I LISTEN TO THE VOICES...

IN THE NAME OF THE GOVERNMENT OF EARTH, I PROCLAIM THIS TO BE MARTIAN TERRITORY, TO BE EQUALLY DIVIDED BETWEEN THE MEMBER NATIONS.

WHAT ARE THEY SAYING? I TURN IN THE SUN, LIKE A WHEEL, INVISIBLE AND LAZY, GOLDEN AND TIRELESS...

WHAT'S OVER THERE?

A WELL!

COME ON. LET'S SEE.
The approach of warmth, three objects bend over the well mouth and my coolness rises to the objects...

Think it's good water?

We'll see. Someone get a bucket.

I will!

A sound of running. Then... returning...

Here we are.

Let it down on the rope. Easy...

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

Want to test this water, regent?

Let's have it.

What a beautiful well. Look at the construction. How old do you think it is?
GOD KNOWS, WHEN WE LANDED IN THAT TOWN YESTERDAY, COLE SAID THERE HASN'T BEEN LIFE ON MARS IN TEN THOUSAND YEARS.

IMAGINE! HOW IS IT, REGENT? THE WATER.

PURE AS SILVER.HAVE SOME...

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... I DON'T KNOW. GOT A TERRIFIC HEADACHE. ALL OF A SUDDEN.

DID YOU DRINK THE WATER YET?
Now I know who I am...
No. I didn't touch any, it's not that. I was just bending over the well, and all of a sudden my head split. I... feel better... now...

My name is Stephen Leonard Jones and I am 23 years old and I have just come in a rocket from a planet called Earth and I am standing with my good friends by an old well on the planet Mars...

What's wrong, Jones?

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

Nothing's wrong. Let's nothing at all. Eat...
The food is good. It has been ten thousand years since food. It touches my 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. I test the air...

I tilt my head and rest my hands holding the silver utensils of eating. I feel everything... you keep breathing funny. Coughing... maybe a little cold coming on. check with the doc later, Jones!
I nod my head and it is a good nod. It is good to do things after ten thousand years. It is good to breathe air and it is good to feel the sun on the flesh and it is good to feel the fine ivory skeleton beneath. I sit enchanted...

Come out of it, Jones. We've got to move...

Y-yes.

The others have gone murmuring to the silver ship from which they came. Regent stands by the stone well, looking down. I stand high and it is a long way to the ground when I look down from my eyes in my head. I walk to Regent, and it is good walking...

It's pretty deep, eh, Jones?

It is called a soul well.
Regent raises his head and looks at me...

How do you know that? A soul well? I never heard of a soul well...

It is a place where waiting things... things that once had flesh...

Wait and wait...

The sand is fire and the ship is silver fire and the heat is good to feel. I smell the rocket boiling in the hotness of the day. I stand below the port...

Hey, Jones? Where's Regent? I... saw him by the well...

And as I say that, I reach out and touch Regent's arm...
One of them runs toward the well. I begin 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 within me, tiny and afraid...

Let me go! Let me go! Hey! Regent's in the well...

And there is a feeling within me as if something is trying to get free... a pounding on doors, a rushing down dark corridors, and up passages, echoing and screaming...

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 with him. Did you see him fall? 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...

They stretch me out and the seizures come and go like earthquakes and the deep hidden voice in me screams...

This is Jones. This is me. Don't believe him. Let me out.

I close my eyes, the screaming stops. The shiverings cease. I rise, as in a cool well, released.

He's dead. Jones is dead. From what? Shock. It looks like...
WHAT KIND OF SHOCK?

... I SAY! AND NOW MY NAME IS SESSIONS AND MY LIPS MOVE CRISPLY, AND I AM CAPTAIN OF THESE MEN. I STAND AMONG THEM AND I AM LOOKING DOWN AT A BODY WHICH LIES COOLING ON THE SAND. I CLAP MY HANDS TO MY HEAD...

CAPTAIN! WHAT IS IT?

IT'S NOTHING. JUST A HEADACHE. I'LL BE ALL RIGHT...

WE'D BETTER GET OUT OF THE SUN, SIR.

Y-YES, WE... SHOULDN'T 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. FAR DOWN IN THE MOIST EARTHENWORKS OF THE BODY, IN RED FATHOMS, IT ECHOES AND PLEADS... HELP, HELP, HELP...

YOU DON'T LOOK TOO WELL, SIR!

YES! I...I...

HELP!

WHAT, SIR?

I DIDN'T SAY ANYTHING.

YOU SAID 'HELP,' SIR.
The body is laid out in the shadow of the rocket and the voice in me screams in the deep underwater catacombs of bone and crimson tide. I clap my hands to my mouth...but it comes out...

A gun is in my hand. I lift it. I must still the screaming voice inside me. An explosion...

Don't, sir...good god!

Get inside, all of you. Go back to earth. Hurry!

The screaming is cut off. Shadows run toward me. I drop to the sand. How good it feels to die.
I open my eyes and there is the captain lying on the red sand, his skull split by a bullet, his eyes wide, his tongue protruding between his white teeth. And I cry out...

Good God, he killed himself!

I bend to touch him, the men are horrified. They stand over the two dead men and turn their heads to see the distant well where Regent lies lolling in deep waters. And I say...

The fool! Why did he do that?

A croaking comes out of their dry lips...a whimpering...a childish protest against this awful dream. The men turn to me and one of them says...

That makes you, Captain, Mathews.

I know...
ONLY FOUR OF US LEFT NOW.

GOOD GOD, IT ALL HAPPENED SO QUICK.

I DON'T WANT TO STAY HERE. LET'S GET OUT!

THE MEN CLAMOR. I GO TO THEM AND TOUCH THEM WITH A CONFIDENCE THAT ALMOST SINGS IN ME...

LISTEN TO ME. WAIT...
I touch their shoulders and their arms and their hands and we all fall silent. For we are one...

No! No! Inner voices, crying, deep down inside us... unheard. We are Samuel Mathews and William Spaulding and Forrest Cole and John Summers, and we say nothing but look upon each other with our white faces and shaking hands... and we say...

Now...
No, no, no! Four voices scream, hidden and layered down and stored forever. Our feet walk in the sand and it is as if a great hand with eight fingers was moving across the dead sea bottom...

We bend to the well, looking down. From the cool depths, four faces peer back up at us...
...into cold waters...
down through cool darkness
and one drop into the mouth and
balances are gone, and one by one
by one we bend until our
The sun sets. The stars wheel upon the night sky. Far out there is a wink of light. Another rocket is coming, leaving red marks in space...
I am simply waiting...

I cannot.

I what I am when I do not know. I was young, how can I tell you old songs of this world when it see the sun, and sometimes I sing stars of night and morning; and I throat, overhead, I see the cold in a well, like vapor in a stone I live in a well, I live like smoke...
The Long Years!
WHENEVER THE WIND CAME THROUGH THE MARTIAN SKY, HE AND HIS FAMILY WOULD SIT IN THEIR STONE HUT AND WARM THEIR HANDS OVER A WOOD FIRE! THE WIND WOULD STIR THE CANAL WATERS AND ALMOST BLOW THE STARS OUT OF THE SKY, BUT MR. HATHAWAY WOULD SIT CONTENTED AND TALK TO HIS WIFE, AND HIS WIFE WOULD REPLY, AND HE WOULD SPEAK TO HIS TWO DAUGHTERS AND HIS SON ABOUT THE OLD DAYS ON EARTH, AND THEY WOULD ALL ANSWER NEATLY...
Mr. Hathaway went out into the Martian night! It was the twentieth year after the Great War! Mars was a tomb planet! Whether or not Earth was the same was a matter of much debate for Hathaway and his family on those long Martian nights! He called into the hut...

I'm going to take a walk!

All right, dear!

Hathaway gazed up at Earth burning green in the windy sky! Then he looked across the long-dead sea bottoms...

Not another living thing on this entire planet! Just myself... and them!
Hathaway moved quietly down through the series of ruins...

Well, I'm good for another twenty years if I'm careful! Someone might come! Either across the dead seas or out of space in a rocket on a little thread of red flame!

He came to a solitary martian graveyard... a series of small hexagonal stones on a hill swept by a lonely wind! He looked down at the graves with crude wooden crosses on them, and names...

Tears did not come to Mr. Hathaway's eyes! They had dried long ago...

Do you forgive me for what I've done? I was very much alone! You do understand, don't you?
He returned to the stone hut... and once more, just before going in, shaded his eyes, searching the black sky...

One keeps waiting and waiting and looking, and one night, perhaps...

There was a tiny red flame on the sky! He stepped away from the light of the hut...

...and one looks again!

The tiny red flame was still there...

It wasn't there last night!
He stumbled and fell, picked himself up, ran behind the hut, swiveled the telescope, and pointed it at the sky...

A minute later... after a long, wild staring... he appeared in the low door of the hut! The wife and the two daughters and the son turned their heads to him! Finally he was able to speak...

I have good news! I have looked at the sky! A rocket is coming to take us all home! It will be here in the early morning!

Then, Mr. Hathaway began to cry gently...
He burned what was left of NEW NEW YORK THAT MORNING AT THREE! He took a torch and moved into the plastic city, and with the flame touched the walls here and there! The city bloomed up in great tosses of heat and light! It was a square mile of illumination, big enough to be seen out in space! It would beckon the rocket down to Mr. Hathaway and his family...

His heart beating rapidly with pain, he returned to the hut! He held up a dusty bottle into the light... See? Wine I saved, just for tonight! I knew that someday someone would find us! We'll have a drink to celebrate!
HE POURED FIVE GLASSES FULL...
IT'S BEEN A LONG TIME! REMEMBER THE DAY
THE WAR BROKE? TWENTY YEARS AND SEVEN MONTHS
AGO! AND ALL THE ROCKETS WERE CALLED HOME
FROM MARS! AND YOU AND I AND THE CHILDREN
WERE OUT IN THE MOUNTAINS...

WE RAN OUR HORSES... ALMOST KILLING THEM,
REMEMBER? BUT WE GOT TO THE CITY A WEEK
LATE! EVERYONE WAS GONE! AMERICA HAD BEEN
DESTROYED! EVERY ROCKET HAD LEFT WITHOUT
WAITING FOR STRAGGLERS! REMEMBER? REMEMBER?
He lifted his glass...

And it turned out we were the only ones left!
Lord, Lord, how the years pass! I couldn't have stood it without you here... all of you! I'd have killed myself without you! But with you... it was worth waiting! Here's to us, then... and to our long wait together!

He drank! The wife and the two daughters and the son raised their glasses to their lips! The wine ran down over the chins of all four of them...


CAPTAIN... WILDER!
CAPTAIN WILDER JUMPED DOWN AND STOOD THERE LOOKING AT THE OLD MAN...

GOOD LORD! HATHAWAY... FROM MY OLD CREW... FROM THE FOURTH EXPEDITION!

IT'S BEEN A LONG TIME, CAPTAIN! I'M OLD!

I'M NOT YOUNG MYSELF ANY MORE! I'VE BEEN OUT TO JUPITER AND SATURN AND NEPTUNE FOR TWENTY YEARS!

THEN YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT'S HAPPENED...

I CAN GUESS! WE'VE CIRCLED MARS TWICE! IT'S PRETTY WELL DEAD... NOT ANOTHER SOUL ALIVE? WHAT ABOUT EARTH?

YOU KNOW AS MUCH AS I DO! ARE YOU GOING BACK, SIR?
YES! WE'RE CURIOUS, OF COURSE! WILL YOU TAKE US WITH YOU?

OF COURSE! YOUR WIFE! I REMEMBER HER! TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, WASN'T IT? AND THERE WERE CHILDREN!

MY SON AND TWO DAUGHTERS! THEY'RE UP AT OUR HUT! THERE'S A FINE BREAKFAST WAITING ALL OF YOU! COME!
They walked on up the hill to the hut! Hathaway's wife appeared followed by the two daughters, tall and gracious, and an even taller son...

Alice! You remember Captain Wilder! My daughters, Marguerite and Susan! My son, John! You remember the Captain, surely, children?

Hands were shaken amid laughter and much talk! Everyone moved! Folding tables were hurried out while hot foods were rushed forth, and plates and fine damask napkins and good silverware were laid...

How old are you now, John? Twenty-three, Sir!
CAPTAIN WILDER SHIFTED HIS SILVERWARE CLUMSILY! HIS FACE WAS SUDDENLY PALE! THE MAN NEXT TO HIM WHISPERED...

THAT CAN'T BE RIGHT, SIR! I'M FORTY-THREE MYSELF! I WAS IN SCHOOL THE SAME TIME AS YOUNG JOHN HATHAWAY, THERE... TWENTY YEARS AGO!

HE SAYS HE'S ONLY TWENTY-THREE NOW! HE ONLY LOOKS TWENTY-THREE! BUT THAT'S WRONG! HE SHOULD BE FORTY-TWO, AT LEAST!

THE DAUGHTERS, TOO! I SAW THEM TWENTY YEARS AGO! THEY HAVEN'T CHANGED... NOT A WRINKLE!

WILL YOU DO ME A FAVOR, WILLIAMS? I WANT YOU TO RUN AN ERRAND! I'LL TELL YOU WHERE TO GO! IT ISN'T FAR FROM HERE! I SAW IT FROM THE ROCKET...

WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT SO SERIOUSLY? SMILE NOW! WE'RE GOING HOME!
MRS. HATHAWAY LADLED QUICK SPOONS OF SOUP INTO THEIR BOWLS! CAPTAIN WILDER WATCHED HER DRIFT AWAY, DRIFT WITH HER PINK FACE WARM, SMOOTH AS AN APPLE, UNWRINKLED AND COLORFUL! AFTER A WHILE WILLIAMS LEFT...

WHERE'S HE GOING, CAPTAIN? CHECKING THE ROCKET, MRS. HATHAWAY! BUT AS I WAS SAYING, YOU CERTAINLY LOOK VERY WELL AND YOUNG...

CAPTAIN WILDER TALKED MECHANICALLY, NOT HEARING HIS WORDS, THINKING ONLY OF WILLIAMS RUNNING DOWN THE HILL AND CLIMBING BACK TO TELL WHAT HE FOUND...

WELL? THE FOUR CROSSES WERE THERE, SIR! THE NAMES WERE STILL ON THEM! I WROTE THEM DOWN! 'ALICE, MARGUERITE, SUSAN, AND JOHN HATHAWAY. DIED OF UNKNOWN VIRUS! JULY, 2007.' THAT'S NINETEEN YEARS AGO!
Hathaway stood up...
A toast to all of you! It's good to be with friends again! And to my wife and children, without whom I couldn't have survived alone! It is only...through...

He did not cry out as he fell forward over the table and slipped to the ground! Wilder knelt and took the old man's hand! Hathaway's voice was barely audible...

I... I spoiled the breakfast! Say good-bye to Alice... and the children...

No! No! Don't! They wouldn't understand! I wouldn't want them to understand! Don't! I... I...
He was dead! Wilder arose, went to Alice Hathaway, and looked into her face...

Do you know what has just happened? Something about my husband!

He has just passed away. His heart...

I'm sorry!

How do you feel? He didn't want us to feel badly. He told us it would happen someday, and he didn't want us to cry!
HE DIDN'T TEACH US HOW, YOU KNOW! HE DIDN'T WANT US TO KNOW HOW TO CRY! HE SAID IT WAS THE WORST THING THAT COULD HAPPEN TO A MAN TO KNOW HOW TO BE LONELY AND KNOW HOW TO BE SAD AND THEN TO CRY! SO WE WEREN'T TO KNOW WHAT CRYING IS...OR BEING SAD!

MR. HATHAWAY DID A FINE JOB ON YOU AND YOUR CHILDREN!

HE WOULD HAVE LIKED TO HEAR YOU SAY THAT! HE WAS SO PROUD OF US! AFTER A WHILE, HE EVEN FORGOT THAT HE MADE US! AT THE END HE LOVED AND TOOK US AS HIS REAL WIFE AND CHILDREN! AND, IN A WAY, WE ARE!

YOU GAVE HIM A GOOD DEAL OF COMFORT!

HE Couldn'T MAKE US GROW OLD! HE GOT OLDER EVERY DAY, BUT WE STAYED THE SAME! I GUESS HE DIDN'T MIND! I GUESS HE WANTED US THIS WAY!

WE'LL BURY HIM DOWN IN THE CEMETERY WHERE THE OTHER FOUR CORPSES ARE! I THINK HE WOULD LIKE THAT!
After the funeral, Williams nodded at the stone hut...

What are we going to do about them? You can't leave them here, like that...as they are!

Here's my gun! If you can do anything about this, you're a better man than I!

Here! Take your gun! I know what you mean! One of the Daughters smiled at me! So did the others! Lord! It'd be murder!

There'll never be anything as fine as them, again!

Five minutes later, Williams returned...sweating...

They're built to last! Ten...fifty...two hundred years! Yes, they've as much right to...to life as you or I! Well...get aboard!
On nights when the wind comes over the dead sea bottoms and through the graveyard, over the four old crosses and the one new one, there is a light burning in the low stone hut! Inside are a woman, two daughters, and a son tending a low fire for no reason and laughing and talking...

And night after night, year after year, for no reason at all, the woman comes out and looks at the sky for a long moment... Looking at the green burning earth... Not knowing why she looks...

... And then she goes back and throws a stick on the fire, and the wind comes up and the dead sea goes on being dead!

-The End-
there will come soft rains...
The sun came out from behind the rain. The house stood alone in a city of rubble and ashes. This was the one house left standing! At night, the ruined city gave off a radioactive glow which could be seen for miles. The entire west face of the house was black, save for five places. Here, the white silhouette of a man mowed a lawn. There, as in a photograph, a woman bent to pick flowers. Still farther over, their images outlined in one titanic instant, 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 the ball which never came down...
The morning house lay empty, in the living room, the voice-clock sang, repeating and repeating its sounds into the emptiness...

Tick-tock! Seven o'clock! Time to get up! Time to get up! Seven o'clock...

In the kitchen, the breakfast stove gave a hissing sigh and ejected from its warm interior eight pieces of perfectly browned toast, eight eggs sunny-side up, sixteen slices of bacon, two coffees, and two cool glasses of milk...

Seven-nine! Breakfast time! Seven-nine...
SOMEBEWHERE IN THE WALLS, RELAYS CLICKED... MEMORY TAPES GLIDED UNDER ELECTRIC EYES...
TODAY IS AUGUST 4, 2026! TODAY IS MR. FEATHERSTONE'S BIRTHDAY! TODAY IS THE ANNIVERSARY OF TILITA'S MARRIAGE! INSURANCE IS PAYABLE... AS ARE THE WATER, GAS, AND LIGHT BILLS...

THE VOICE CLOCK SOUNDDED AGAIN...
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. IT WAS RAINING AGAIN OUTSIDE. THE WEATHER-BOX ON THE FRONT DOOR SANG QUIETLY...

RAIN, RAIN, GO AWAY! RUBBERS, RAINCOATS FOR TODAY...
Outside, the garage chimed and lifted its doors to reveal the waiting car...

After a long wait, the door swung down again. At eight-thirty, the eggs were shriveled and the toast was like stone. An aluminum wedge scraped them into the sink...

...where hot water whirled them down a metal throat which digested and flushed them away to the distant sea. The dirty dishes were dropped into a hot washer and emerged twinkling dry... Nine-fifteen! Time to clean!
Out of warrens in the wall, tiny robot mice-like things darted. The rooms were acrawl with the small cleaning animals, all rubber and metal...

They thudded against chairs, whirling their mustached runners, kneading the rug nap, sucking gently at hidden dust. Then, like mysterious invaders, they popped back into their nooks, their pink electric-eyes faded. The house was clean...

Ten-fifteen. The garden sprinklers came up in golden founts. The water pelted windowpanes, running down the charred west side where the house had been burned evenly free of its white paint...
T.W.E.L.V.E  N.O.O.N.  A  D.O.G  W.H.I.N.E.D,

M.U.D...

O.U.T...

---
The dog ran around, hysterically yelping to each door, at last realizing, as the house realized, that only silence was here! It sniffed the air and scratched at the kitchen door.

Behind the door, the stove was making lunch... pancakes which filled the house with a rich baking odor and the scent of maple syrup...

The dog frothed at the mouth, lying at the door, sniffing, its eyes turned to fire...
IT RAN WILDLY IN CIRCLES, BITING ITS TAIL, SPUN IN A FRENZY...

...AND DIED! IT LAY IN THE HALLWAY FOR AN HOUR...

TWO O'CLOCK! TWO O'CLOCK!

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...

Two thirty-five. Bridge tables sprouted from patio walls. Playing cards fluttered onto pads in a shower of pips. Martinis and egg salad sandwiches manifested on an oaken server. Music played...

Four-o’clock. The tables folded like great butterflies back through panel walls...
Four-thirty. The nursery walls glowed. Animals took shape... yellow giraffes, blue lions, pink antelopes, lilac panthers... cavorting in crystal substance! It was the children's hour...

Five o'clock. The bath filled with clear hot water...

Six, seven, eight o'clock. Dinner. In the study... a click. A cigar popped up in the metal stand opposite the hearth... half an inch of grey ash on it, smoking, waiting...
Nine o'clock. Hidden circuits warmed the beds, for nights were cool here...

The fire burned on the stone hearth and the cigar fell away into a mound of quiet ash on its tray...

The empty chairs faced each other between the silent walls and the music played...
At ten o'clock the house began to die! The wind blew, a falling bough crashed through the kitchen window...

Cleaning solvent, bottled, shattered over the stove!

The room was ablaze in an instant...

Fire! Fire!
The house lights flashed on water pumps shot from the ceilings...

But the solvent spread on the linoleum, licking, eating, under the kitchen door, while the voices took up the chorus...

Fire! Fire! Fire!

The house tried to save itself. Doors sprang tightly shut, but the windows were broken by the heat, and the wind blew, sucking upon the fire...
THE HOUSE GAVE GROUND AS THE FIRE IN TEN BILLION ANGRY SPARKS MOVED WITH FLAMING EASE FROM ROOM TO ROOM THROUGH THE HOUSE...

WHILE SCURRYING WATER RATS SQUEAKED FROM THE WALLS, PISTOLED THEIR WATER, AND RAN FOR MORE. THE WALL SPRAYS LET DOWN SHOWERS OF MECHANICAL RAIN...
But it was too late! Somewhere, sighing, a pump shrugged to a stop. The quenching rains ceased. The reserve water supply which had filled baths and washed dishes for many quiet days, was gone! The fire crackled on.

It fed upon picassos and matisses in the halls, like delicacies, baking off the oily flesh, tenderly crisping the canvases into black shavings...
Now the fire lay in beds, stood in windows, changing the color of the drapes...

And then reinforcements! From attic trap-doors, blind robot faces peered down with faucet-mouths gushing green chemical...

The fire backed off, as even an elephant must at the sight of a dead snake. Now there were twenty snakes whipping over the floor, killing the fire with a clear cold venom of green froth...
But the fire was clever! It had sent flames outside the house, up through the attic to the pumps there! An explosion...

The attic brain which directed the pumps was shattered into bronze shrapnel on the beams the fire rushed back into every closet and felt of the clothes hung there...
The house shuddered, oak bone on bone, its bared skeleton crouching from the heat, its wires, its nerves revealed as if a surgeon had torn the skin off to let red veins and capillaries quiver in the scalding air. Heat snapped mirrors. The voices wailed...

...like a tragic nursery rhyme. A dozen voices, high, low, like children dying in a forest, alone, alone. And the voices faded as the wires popped their sheathing. In the nursery, the blue lions roared, purple giraffes bounded off, Panthers ran in circles, changing color...
Voices died. In the last instant under the fire avalanche, other choruses, oblivious, could be heard announcing the time, playing music, reminding the hot flames of due bills. Doors opened and slammed. A few last cleaning mice darted bravely out to carry away the horrid ashes...

And in the kitchen, an instant before the rain of fire and timber, the stove could be seen making breakfast at a psychopathic rate...ten dozen eggs, six loaves of toast, twenty dozen bacon strips, which, eaten by fire started the stove working again, hysterically hissing...
The crash! The attic smashed into the kitchen... the kitchen into the cellar... cellar into sub-cellar. Deep-freeze, armchair, film tapes, circuits, beds, all like skeletons thrown in a cluttered mound deep under...

Then, smoke... and silence!

Dawn showed faintly in the east. 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...

---THE END---
Wars is Heaven!
The ship came down from space. It came down from the stars and the silent gulfs of space. It was a new ship, the only one of its kind. It had fire in its belly and men in its body, and it moved with clean silence, fiery and hot. A crowd had gathered at its New York launching site and shouted and waved their hands up into the sunlight... and the rocket had jerked up, bloomed out great flowers of heat and color, and run away into space on the First Voyage to Mars! And now, it was decelerating with metal efficiency in the upper zones of Mars's atmosphere...
Navigator Lustig, archaeologist Hinkston, and Captain John Black watched Mars swing up under them...

Mars! Mars! Good old Mars! Here we are!

WELL!

The ship landed softly on a lawn of green grass. Outside, upon the lawn, stood an iron deer. Further up the lawn, a tall brown Victorian house sat in the quiet sunlight. An old swing which was hooked into the porch ceiling swung back and forth, back and forth, in a little breeze...

Well... well I'll be darned...

It can't be...

It just can't be...

Lord!
Around the rocket in four directions spread the town, green and motionless in the Martian spring. There were white houses and red brick ones, and tall elm trees blowing in the wind, and tall maples, and horse chestnuts. And church steeples with golden bells silent in them...

Captain Black, the atmosphere is fine for breathing, sir!

Are you sure?

Then we'll go out.

Hold on, Lustig. Just a moment. Nobody gave any orders. How do we know what this is?

We know what it is, sir. It's a small town with good air in it, sir.
AND IT'S A SMALL TOWN LIKE AN EARTH TOWN. INCREDIBLE! IT CAN'T BE, BUT IT IS.

DO YOU THINK THAT THE CIVILIZATIONS OF TWO PLANETS CAN PROGRESS AT THE SAME RATE AND EVOLVE IN THE SAME WAY, HINKSTON?

I WOULDN'T HAVE THOUGHT SO, SIR. IT IS QUITE STRANGE!

STRANGE, HECK! IT'S ABSOLUTELY IMPOSSIBLE! LOOK OUT THERE. TELL ME IF IT'S LOGICAL THAT MARTIANS SHOULD HAVE PORCH SWINGS, VICTORIAN HOUSES, LAWNS, CHESTNUT TREES...

IT MAY BE THAT THERE ARE SIMILAR PATTERNS OF THOUGHT, MOVEMENT, CIVILIZATION ON EVERY PLANET IN OUR SYSTEM!

WELL! LET'S TAKE A CLOSER LOOK! ATTENTION ALL HANDS! REMAIN IN THE SHIP...
The three men came out into the sunshine. It was a beautiful spring day. Somewhere a piano played, softly, drowsily. The song was Beautiful Dreamer. Lustig began to tremble! Hinston’s voice was feeble...

I...I think I’ve solved this... all of this, sir! And what is the solution, Hinston?

The soft wind blew. The sky was serene. Somewhere a horse and wagon trotted and rolled by, bumping...

Rocket travel began to Mars in the years before the First World War, sir!

No! This is 1960, Hinston. Before the First World War...?

BUT THE WORK, HINKSTON ... THE WORK OF BUILDING A COMPLEX THING LIKE A ROCKET...

THE WORLD WAS A DIFFERENT PLACE IN 1905... THEY COULD HAVE KEPT IT A SECRET MUCH MORE EASILY.

YOU MAKE IT SOUND ALMOST REASONABLE, HINKSTON!

IT IS, SIR! IT HAS TO BE! LOOK HOW OLD-FASHIONED EVERYTHING IS. WE HAVE THE PROOF HERE BEFORE US. ALL WE HAVE TO DO NOW IS FIND SOME PEOPLE AND VERIFY IT...
Hollow echoes sounded from the boards as they walked across the porch and stood before the screen door. Inside they could see a crystal chandelier and a comfortable Morris chair. Captain John Black rang the bell.

If you're selling something, I'm much too busy and I haven't time...

I... I beg your pardon, but we're strangers here, ma'am! We're from Earth, and we want to know how this town got here and how you got here!

The woman addressed them as though she were addressing children...

This town was built in 1886. This is Green Lake, Wisconsin, on the continent of America, surrounded by the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans, on a place called the world. Now, go away! Good-bye!
SHE SLAMMED THE DOOR. THEY LOOKED AT ONE ANOTHER...

WISCONSIN?! BUT... BUT... COULD WE HAVE GOTTEN OURSELVES FOULED UP AND BY ACCIDENT COME BACK TO EARTH?

NO! NO! WE CHECKED EVERY MILE OF THE WAY! WE WENT PAST THE MOON AND OUT INTO SPACE. I'M SURE WE'RE ON MARS, SIR!

HOW DOES THIS SOUND TO YOU, HINKSTON? SUPPOSE, AS YOU SAID, ROCKET TRAVEL OCCURRED YEARS AGO. AND WHEN THE EARTH PEOPLE HAD BEEN HERE FOR A NUMBER OF YEARS THEY BEGAN TO GET HOMESICK FOR EARTH. FIRST A MILD NEUROSIS ABOUT IT, THEN A FULL-FLEDGED PSYCHOSIS! THEN, THREATENED INSANITY! WHAT WOULD YOU DO, AS A PSYCHIATRIST, IF FACED WITH SUCH A PROBLEM?
WELL, I'D REARRANGE THE CIVILIZATION ON MARS SO IT RESEMBLED EARTH MORE AND MORE EVERY DAY! I'D TRY TO CONVINCE THESE POOR HOMESICK SOULS THAT THIS REALLY WAS EARTH, NOT MARS AT ALL....

GOOD ENOUGH! THAT WOMAN IN THAT HOUSE BACK THERE JUST THINKS SHE'S LIVING ON EARTH! IT PROTECTS HER SANITY! SHE AND ALL THE OTHERS IN THIS TOWN....

CAPTAIN! OH... MY LORD...

LUSTIG STARED DOWN THE QUIET, DREAMING AFTERNOON STREET...

WHAT IS IT, LUSTIG? OH, SIR... SIR... WHAT I SEE... WHAT I SEE NOW BEFORE ME... OH...
And Lustig began to cry. His fingers came up, twisting and trembling, and his face was all wonder and joy and incredulity. He began to run, stumbling, awkwardly...

Now Lustig was running at full speed, shouting. He turned into a yard half-way down the little shady street and leaped upon the porch of a large green house. Two old people stood in the doorway, their faces lighting up...

Oh, God... God... Lustig! Don't let him get away!

Grandma! Grandpa! Albert! Oh, Albert! It's been so many years! How you've grown, boy...
ALBERT LUSTIG SOBBED AS HE HELD THEM, TURNED THEM, KISSED THEM, HUGGED THEM, CRIED ON THEM, HELD THEM OUT AGAIN, AND BLINKED AT THE TWO LITTLE OLD PEOPLE...

GRANDMA! GRANDPA! GOOD TO SEE YOU! YOU LOOK FINE...FINE!

COME INSIDE, LAD. COME INSIDE...

CAPTAIN BLACK! HINKSTON! COME HERE! COME HERE! I WANT YOU TO MEET MY GRANDFOLKS!

HOWDY! ANY FRIEND OF ALBERT'S IS OURS, TOO! DON'T STAND THERE WITH YOUR MOUTHS OPEN! COME ON IN!
In the living room of the old house it was cool and a grandfather clock ticked high and long in one corner...

How long you been here, Grandma?

A good many years, ever since we died.

Oh, yes, Captain! They've been dead for thirty years.

And you take this so calmly?

Tush, Captain! Who are we to question what happens? Here we are, alive again, and no questions asked. A second chance...
IS... IS THIS... HEAVEN?

NONSENSE, NO. IT'S A WORLD AND WE GET A SECOND CHANCE. BUT THEN, NOBODY TOLD US WHY WE WERE ON THE FIRST EARTH, EITHER. HOW DO WE KNOW THERE WASN'T ANOTHER... BEFORE THAT ONE?

FAR AWAY, OUTSIDE IN THE SUNLIGHT, THERE WAS A SOUND OF VOICES AND A GREAT HELLO...

WHAT'S THAT?

WE'LL SOON FIND OUT! COME ON! EXCUSE US, LUSTIG!

WHAT THE...? THEY'RE ABANDONING THE SHIP...

CAPTAIN BLACK STOOD LOOKING AT HIS SHIP! THE PORT WAS OPEN AND HIS CREW WAS STREAMING OUT, WAVING THEIR HANDS. A CROWD OF PEOPLE HAD GATHERED...
IN AND THROUGH AND AMONG THESE PEOPLE THE MEMBERS OF THE CREW WERE RUNNING, TALKING, LAUGHING, SHAKING HANDS. PEOPLE DID LITTLE DANCES. PEOPLE SWARMED. THE ROCKET LAY EMPTY AND ABANDONED...

I'LL HAVE THEIR SKINS FOR THIS, SIR! THOSE ARE ALL OLD RELATIVES AND FRIENDS!

DON'T BE TOO HARD ON THEM, BY GOD!

A BRASS BAND EXPLODED, THEN, EACH MEMBER OF THE CREW WITH A MOTHER ON ONE ARM, A FATHER OR SISTER ON THE OTHER, WAS SPIRITED OFF DOWN THE STREET, INTO COTTAGES OR BIG MANSIONS, AND DOORS SLAMMED SHUT...

THINK HOW THEY FELT, CAPTAIN... SEEING FAMILIAR FACES OUTSIDE THE SHIP!

THAT'S NO EXCUSE! I WOULD HAVE OBEYED ORDERS! I WOULD HAVE...
The captain's mouth remained open. Along the sidewalk under the Martian sun, tall, smiling, eyes blue, face tan, came a young man of some twenty-six years...

John! John, you old beggar, you! It... it's you! Edward!

Ed! What is this? You haven't changed over the years. You died when you were twenty-six, and I was nineteen, and here you are, and, Lord, what goes on, what goes on?

Mom's waiting, John!

Mom? And Dad, too! At the old house on Knoll Avenue! Come along! Lunch is waiting!
Hinkston was gone. He had seen his own house down the street and was running for it. Edward grabbed Captain Black's arm and marched him...

There's the house, John. Remember it? Remember it? Heck! I bet I can beat you to the front door...

They ran. The wind roared over Captain John Black's ears. The ground roared beneath his feet. He saw the golden figure of Edward Black pull ahead of him. He saw the house rush forward... the door open... the screen swing back...
In the doorway, mom, pink and plump and bright. And behind her, pepper grey, dad, with his pipe in his hand...

Mom! Dad!

It was a long afternoon. They finished lunch and they sat in the living room and he told them all about his rocket and his being captain...

I'll wake in the morning and I'll be in my rocket in space, and all this will be gone.

No! No! Don't think that! Don't question! God is good to us. Let's be happy.
AND THEN IT WAS NIGHT AND HE LEFT THE LAND OF CIGAR SMOKE AND PERFUME AND BOOKS AND ASCENDED THE STAIRS, TALKING, TALKING WITH EDWARD. EDWARD PUSHED OPEN THE DOOR AND THERE WAS THE YELLOW BRASS BED AND THE OLD BANNERS FROM COLLEGE DAYS...

IT'S TOO MUCH! I'M NUMB...

A NIGHT'S SLEEP FOR YOU, MY BUCKO!

THE LIGHTS WERE OUT. THEY WERE IN BED, SIDE BY SIDE, AS IN THOSE DAYS, HOW MANY DECADES AGO...

SO THIS IS MARS!

GOOD-NIGHT, JOHN!
CAPTAIN BLACK LAY PEACEFULLY, LETTING HIS THOUGHTS FLOAT...

SO THIS...IS...MARS! WHO LIVED HERE A THOUSAND YEARS AGO ON MARS? MARTIANS? OR HAS THIS ALWAYS BEEN LIKE THIS? MARTIANS? MARTIANS...

HE LAUGHED OUT LOUD, ALMOST. HE HAD THE MOST RIDICULOUS THEORY ALL OF A SUDDEN, IT GAVE HIM A KIND OF CHILLED FEELING. JUST SUPPOSE...

...SUPPOSE THERE WERE MARTIANS LIVING ON MARS AND THEY SAW OUR SHIP COMING AND SAW US INSIDE OUR SHIP AND HATED US! AND SUPPOSE THEY WANTED TO DESTROY US, AS INVADERS, AND THEY WANTED TO DO IT CLEVERLY, SO THAT WE'D BE TAKEN OFF GUARD...
What a clever weapon to use against earthmen with atomic weapons! What more natural? What more simple? A man doesn't ask questions when his mother is suddenly brought back to life; he's much too happy!

And the brass band played and everybody was taken to private homes. And now we are all in various beds, with no weapons to protect us, and the rocket lies in the moonlight, empty...

And it would be so simple for my brother, here in bed beside me, to turn over and put a knife into my heart while changing form, melting, shifting...becoming a one-eyed, green, and yellow-toothed Martian...
AND IN ALL THE HOUSES DOWN THE STREET A DOZEN BROTHERS OR FATHERS SUDDENLY MELTING AWAY AND TAKING OUT KNIVES AND DOING THINGS TO THE UNSUSPECTING SLEEPING EARTHMEN!

JOHN! WHERE ARE YOU GOING?

I... I... FOR A DRINK OF WATER... BUT YOU'RE NOT THIRSTY!

CAPTAIN JOHN BLACK BROKE AND RAN ACROSS THE ROOM! HE SCREAMED TWICE...

HE NEVER REACHED THE DOOR...
In the morning, the brass band played a mournful dirge, and from every house came little solemn processions bearing long boxes. And along the sunfilled streets, weeping and changing, came grandmas and grandpas and mothers and sisters and brothers, walking to the graveyard where there were open holes freshly dug and new tombstones installed...
The coffins were lowered! Soil was shoveled in on the coffin tops! Then the brass band slammed and banged back into town and the crowd, with melting faces, shifting like wax, stood around and waved and shouted as the rocket was torn to pieces and strewn about and blown up...
Many nights Fiorello Bodoni would awaken to hear the rockets singing in the dark sky. He would tip-toe from bed, certain that his kind wife was dreaming, and let himself out into the night air, for a silent moment he would let his heart soar alone into space, following the rockets. Now, this very night, he stood half naked in the darkness, watching the fire fountains murmuring in the air... the rockets on their long wild ways to Mars and Saturn and Venus...

WELL, BODONI. DO YOU COME OUT EVERY NIGHT LIKE THIS?

OH, IT'S YOU BRAMENTE! I... I JUST CAME OUT FOR A BREATH OF AIR.
Brante, who also watched the rockets through the midnight hush, sat on a milk crate...

SO? I PREFER THE ROCKETS MYSELF. I WAS A BOY WHEN THEY STARTED, SIXTY YEARS AGO, AND I'VE NEVER BEEN ON ONE YET.

I WILL RIDE UP IN ONE SOMEDAY.

Brante shook his grey head...

FOOL! YOU'LL NEVER GO. THIS IS A RICH MAN'S WORLD. WHEN I WAS YOUNG, THEY WROTE IT IN FIERY LETTERS: THE WORLD OF THE FUTURE... SCIENCE... COMFORT... AND NEW THINGS FOR ALL. HA! SIXTY YEARS, THE FUTURE BECOMES NOW. BUT DO WE FLY IN ROCKETS? NO! WE LIVE IN SHACKS LIKE OUR ANCESTORS BEFORE US.

Perhaps my sons...
OLD MAN, I'VE SAVED THREE THOUSAND DOLLARS! IT TOOK ME SIX YEARS... FOR MY BUSINES... FOR MACHINERY. BUT EVERY NIGHT FOR A MONTH, NOW, I'VE BEEN AWAKE. I HEAR THE ROCKETS, I THINK. AND TONIGHT, I'VE MADE UP MY MIND. ONE OF US WILL FLY TO MARS!

BRAMENTE SNAPPED...

IDIOT! HOW WILL YOU CHOOSE? WHO WILL GO? IF YOU GO, YOUR WIFE WILL HATE YOU. WHEN YOU TELL HER OF YOUR AMAZING TRIP, OVER THE YEARS, WON'T BITTERNESS GNAW AT HER?

NO! NO!
YES! AND YOUR CHILDREN? WILL THEIR LIVES BE FILLED WITH THE MEMORY OF PAPA, WHO FLEW TO MARS WHILE THEY STAYED BEHIND. THEY WILL THINK OF THE ROCKETS ALL THEIR LIVES. THEY WILL LIE AWAKE. THEY WILL BE SICK WITH WANTING... JUST AS YOU ARE SICK NOW. THEY WILL WANT TO DIE IF THEY CANNOT GO. DON'T DO IT, BODONI!

DON'T SET THEIR GOAL, I WARN YOU! LET THEM BE CONTENT WITH BEING POOR. TURN THEIR EYES DOWN TO THEIR HANDS AND TO YOUR JUNK YARD, NOT TO THE STARS.

BUT...

SUPPOSE YOUR WIFE WENT, BODONI? HOW WOULD YOU FEEL, KNOWING SHE HAD SEEN AND YOU HAD NOT? NO, BODONI! BUY A NEW FURNACE, WHICH YOU NEED, AND BURN YOUR DREAMS WITH IT...

GOOD NIGHT, BRAMANTE...
That night, Bodoni lay among his nervous children, beside his mountainous wife, twisting and staring at nothing...

Bramente is right! Better to invest the money. Why save it when only one member of the family can ride the rocket, while the others remain to melt in frustration?

In the morning, the children rushed in, the two boys fighting over a toy rocket, the two girls carrying dolls which duplicated the inhabitants of Mars, Venus and Neptune, green mannequins with three yellow eyes and twelve fingers...

Papa! Papa! We saw the Venus rocket! It took off... Whooosh! Stop it! Stop it!
With his breakfast curdled within him, Fiorello Bodoni worked in his junk yard, ripping metal, pounding it, readying it to be melted in the new furnace he would buy. Competition had kept him on the insane edge of poverty for twenty years. In the afternoon, a man entered Bodoni's junk yard...

Hey, Bodoni, I got some metal for you. A rocket ship. What's wrong? Don't you want it?

A...rocket ship...

Of course it's only a mockup. You know, when they plan a rocket they build a full-scale model first, of aluminum. You might make a small profit if you melt her down. Let you have it for two thousand...

I... I... haven't the money!
SorRy, BodOni. I thought i'd help you. you told me how everybody always outbids you on scrap. i thought i'd slip this to you on the q.t.....

i need a furnace! i've been saving for that

okay, Bodoni! i understand...

so if i bought your rocket, i wouldn't be able to melt it down...

Sure... i couldn't possibly use the rocket if i bought it from you....
I KNOW, BODON! OKAY...

BUT...BUT, I AM A GREAT FOOL. I WILL TAKE MY MONEY FROM THE BANK AND GIVE IT TO YOU...

BUT IF YOU CAN'T MELT THE ROCKET DOWN...

DELIVER IT!

ALL RIGHT...IF YOU SAY SO. TONIGHT?

TONIGHT WOULD BE FINE. YES, I WOULD LIKE TO HAVE A ROCKET SHIP TONIGHT.
That night, there was a moon. The rocket was white and big in the junkyard. It held the whiteness of the moon and the blueness of the stars. Bodoni looked at it and loved it. He wanted to pet it and lie against it, pressing it with his cheek, telling it all the secret wants of his heart...

You are all mine... even if you never move or spit fire, and just sit here and rust for fifty years, you are mine...

The rocket smelled of time and distance. It was like walking into a clock. It was finished with Swiss delicacy. Bodoni whispered excitedly...

I might even sleep here tonight...

He sat in the pilot's seat. He touched a lever. He hummed in his shut mouth, his eyes closed...
The humming grew louder, louder, higher, wilder, strange, more exhilarating, trembling in him and leaning him forward and pulling him and the ship in a roaring silence and in a metal screaming, while his fists flew over the controls...

Taking off! The moon! The meteors! Mars! Oh, God, Mars! Mars!

He fell back, exhausted and panting. His shaking hands came loose of the controls. He sat for a long time, breathing out and in, his heart beating. He heard the family radio playing some distant music. He sat for half an hour considering the rocket and his family...

And then he stepped from the rocket and began to walk, and as he walked, he began to laugh, and when he reached the back door of his house, he took a deep breath and called...

Maria! Children! Start packing! We're going to Mars!
The children balanced in the windy junk yard, under the glowing rocket, not touching it yet. They started to cry. Maria looked at her husband...

He turned to the children...

Now, go to the house, all of you. I have phone calls to make, work to do. Tomorrow we leave! Tell no one, understand? It's a secret.

What have you done? It will fly! It will never fly! Rocket ships cost millions. Have you millions?
Bodoni started to work. Through the midnight hours trucks came, packages were delivered, and Bodoni, smiling, exhausted his bank account, with blowtorch and metal stripping, he assaulted the rocket; added, took away, worked fiery magics and secret insults upon it. He bolted nine ancient automobile motors into the empty engine room. Then he welded the engine room shut, so none could see his hidden labors.
At dawn, he entered the kitchen...

Mama, I'm ready for breakfast...

At sunset, he called to the children...

We're ready! I've locked them in the closet! I won't let you kill them!

What kind of rocket can you buy for two thousand dollars? A bad one! It will blow up. You will be killed in that rocket. I won't let you...

She would not speak to him...

Give me the key to the closet, Maria!

He put out his hand...
The children hurried to the rocket. Bodoni stood before his wife...

No, I won't go. I'll stay here!

You will understand; you will see then...

At the door of the rocket, the father said...

Listen, children. This rocket is very old. It will fly only one more journey. It will not fly again. This will be the one trip of your life. Keep your eyes wide...

Yes, papa...

Listen. Keep your ears clean. Smell the smells of the rocket. Feel. Remember. So when you return, you will talk of it all the rest of your lives.

Yes, papa...
The ship was quiet as a stopped clock. The airlock hissed shut behind them. He strapped them all, like tiny mummies, into rubber hammocks...

He jerked ten switches. The rocket thundered and leaped. The children danced in their hammocks, screaming...

Taking off...

The moon dreamed by. Meteors broke into fire-works. Time flowed away. The children shouted. Released from their hammocks, hours later, they peered from the ports...

Look! Back there! Earth! There's Mars!
THE ROCKET DROPPED PINK PETALS OF FIRE. THE CHILDREN'S EYES DROPPED SHUT. AT LAST THEY HUNG LIKE DRUNKEN MOTHS IN THEIR COCOON HAMMOCKS ... ASLEEP...

BODONI TIPTOED TO THE AIRLOCK. HE PRESSED A BUTTON. THE AIRLOCK DOOR SWUNG WIDE...

GOOD...

HE STEPPED OUT...
Into space? Into inky tides of meteor and gaseous torch? Into swift mileages and infinite dimensions? No, Bodoni smiled...

All about the quivering rocket lay the junk yard. Maria stood in the kitchen window. Bodoni waved to her...

In the center of the junk yard, manufacturing a magic dream, stood the quivering purring rocket...shaking and roaring, bouncing the netted children like flies in a web...
BODONI WITHDREW INTO THE ROCKET. HE BREATHED EASILY. HE PRAYED...

OH, LET NOTHING HAPPEN TO THIS ILLUSION. LET ALL SPACE COME AND GO, AND RED MARS COME UP UNDER OUR SHIP, AND THE MOONS OF MARS, AND LET THERE BE NO FLAWS IN THE COLOR FILM. LET NOTHING GO WRONG WITH THE HIDDEN MIRRORS AND SCREENS. LET TIME PASS WITHOUT CRISIS...

BODONI AWOKE. RED MARS FLOATED NEAR THE ROCKET. THE CHILDREN SQUEALED...

PAPA! PAPA!

BODONI LOOKED AND SAW RED MARS AND IT WAS GOOD AND THERE WERE NO FLAWS AND HE WAS VERY HAPPY...

AT SUNSET OF THE FIFTH DAY, THE ROCKET STOPPED SHUDDERING. BODONI ANNOUNCED...

WE ARE HOME...
They walked across the junkyard, their blood singing, their faces glowing...

Mama! Mama! Mars... meteors... everything, Mama... Yes. You should have come to see it.

At bedtime, the children gathered before Bodoni...

We want to thank you, Papa. It was nothing... we will remember it for always, Papa. We will never forget.

Very late in the night, Bodoni opened his eyes. His wife whispered...

Now I see. Now I understand. You are the best father in the world. Perhaps... some night, you might take me on just a little trip...

Just a little one, perhaps, Maria!

The end
RAY BRADBURY is the author of more than a dozen novels and collections of short stories that have made him one of the most celebrated writers of our time.

Born in Waukegan, Illinois, in 1920, he has lived for most of his life in Los Angeles, where his family moved in 1934. After graduating from high school he supported himself by selling newspapers while he began to write, and published his first story in 1940. Since then, hundreds of stories by Ray Bradbury have appeared in such magazines as Galaxy, Esquire, Astounding Science Fiction, Playboy, Harpers and The Saturday Evening Post. Among his film credits is the screenplay for Moby Dick, starring Gregory Peck and directed by John Huston. His books include The Martian Chronicles, Dandelion Wine, The October Country and the famous Fahrenheit 451, currently being filmed by the French director, François Truffaut. Most recently, he has written a group of plays, produced as “The World of Ray Bradbury” in Los Angeles and New York.
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