

# Defense Mech

Ray Bradbury

Oh, my god, do you realize how far from Earth we are? Do you really *think* about it? It's enough to scare the guts from a man. Hold me up. *Do* something. Give me sedatives or hold my hand or run call mama. A million cold miles up. See all the flickering stars? Look at my hands tremble. Feel my heart whirling like a hot pinwheel!

The captain comes toward me, a stunned expression on his small, tight face. He takes my arm, looking into my eyes. Hello, captain. I'm sick, if that's what you want to know. I've a right to be scared—just look at all that space! Standing here a moment ago, I stared down at Earth so round and cloud-covered and asleep on a mat of stars, and my brain tore loose and screamed, man, man, how'd you get in a mess like this, in a rocket a million miles past the moon, shooting for Mars with a crew of fourteen others! I can hardly stand up, my knees, my hands, my heart, are shaking apart. Hold me up, sir.

What are hysterics like? The captain unprongs the inter-deck audio and speaks swiftly, scowling, into it. I hope he's phoning the psychiatrist. I need something. Oh, dammit, dammit!

The psychiatrist descends the ladder in immaculate salt-white uniform and walks toward me in a dream. Hello, doctor. You're the one for me. Please, sir, turn this damned rocket around and fly back to New York. I'll go crazy with all this space and distance!

The psychiatrist and the captain's voices murmur and blend, with here and there an emphasis, a toss of head, a gesture:

"Young Halloway here's on a fear-jag, doctor. Can you help him?"

"I'll try. Good man, Halloway is. Imagine you'll need him and his muscles when we land."

"With the crew as small as it is, every man's worth his weight in uranium. He's *got* to be cured."

The psychiatrist shakes his head.

"Might have to squirt him full of drugs to keep him quiet the rest of the expedition."

The captain explodes, saying that is impossible. Blood drums in my head. The doctor moves closer, smelling clean, sharp and white.

“Please, understand, captain, this man is definitely psychotic about going home. His talk is almost a reversion to childhood. I can’t refuse his demands, and his fear seems too deeply based for reasoning. However, I think I’ve an idea. Halloway?”

Yes, sir? Help me, doctor. I want to go home. I want to see popcorn exploding into a buttered avalanche inside a glass cube, I want to roller skate, I want to climb into the old cool wet ice-wagon and go *chikk-chikk-chikk* on the ice with a sharp pick, I want to take long sweating hikes in the country, see big brick buildings and bright-faced people, fight the old gang, anything but this—*awful!*

The psychiatrist rubs his chin.

“All right, son. You can go back to Earth, now, tonight.”

Again the captain explodes.

“You can’t tell him *that*. We’re landing on Mars *today!*”

The psychiatrist pats down the captain patiently.

“Please, captain. Well, Halloway, back to New York for you. How does it sound?”

I’m not not so scared now. We’re going down on the moving ladder and here is the psychiatrist’s cubicle.

He’s pouring lights into my eyes. They revolve like stars on a disc. Lots of strange machines around, attachments to my head, my ears. Sleepy. Oh, so sleepy. Like under warm water. Being pushed around. Laved. Washed. Quiet. Oh, gosh. Sleepy.

“—listen to me, Halloway—”

Sleepy. Doctor’s talking. Very soft, like feathers. Soft, soft.

“—you’re going to land on earth. No matter what they tell you, you’re landing on Earth ... no matter what happens you’ll be on Earth ... everything you see and do will be like on Earth ... remember that ... remember that ... you won’t be afraid because you’ll be on Earth ... remember that ... over and over ... you’ll land on Earth in an hour ... home ... home again ... no matter what anyone says....”

Oh, yes, sir, home again. Sleepy. Home again. Drifting, sleeping, oh thank you, sir, thank you from the bottom of my drowsy, sleepy soul. Yes, sir. Yes, sir. Sleepy. Drifting.

I'm awake!

Hey, everybody, come look! Here comes Earth! Right at us, like a green moss ball off a bat! Coming at us on a curve!

"Check stations! Mars landing!"

"Get into bulgers! Test atmosphere!"

Get into your *what* did he say?

"Your baseball uniform, Holloway. Your baseball uniform."

Yes, sir. My baseball uniform. Where'd I put it? Over here. Head into, legs into, feet into it. There. Ha, this is great! Pitch her in here, old boy, old boy! *Smack!* Yow!

Yes, sir, it's over in that metal locker. I'll take it out. Head, arms, legs into it—I'm dressed. Baseball uniform. Ha! This is great! Pitch 'er in here, ole boy, ole boy! *Smack!* Yow!

"Adjust bulger helmets, check oxygen."

What?

"Put on your catcher's mask, Holloway."

Oh. The mask slides down over my face. Like that. The captain comes rushing up, eyes hot green and angry.

"Doctor, what's this infernal nonsense?"

"You wanted Holloway able to do his work, didn't you, captain?"

"Yes, but what in hell've you done to him?"

Strange. As they talk, I hear their words flow over my head like a wave dashed on a sea-stone, but the words drain off, leaving no imprint. As soon as some words invade my head, something eats and digests them and I think the words are something else entirely.

The psychiatrist nods at me.

“I couldn’t change his basic desire. Given time, yes, a period of months, I could have. But you need him *now*. So, against all the known ethics of my profession, which say one must never lie to a patient, I’ve followed along in his own thought channel. I didn’t dare frustrate him. He wanted to go home, so I *let* him. I’ve given him a fantasy. I’ve set up a protective defense mechanism in his mind that refuses to believe certain realities, that evaluates all things from its own desire for security and home. His mind will automatically block any thought or image that endangers that security.”

The captain stares wildly.

“Then, then Halloway’s insane!”

“Would you have him mad with fear, or able to work on Mars hindered by only a slight ‘tetched’ condition? Coddle him and he’ll do fine. Just remember, we’re landing on Earth, *not* Mars.”

“Earth, Mars, you’ll have *me* raving next!”

The doctor and the captain certainly talk weirdly. Who cares? Here comes Earth! Green, expanding like a moist cabbage underfoot!

“Mars landing! Air-lock opened! Use bulger oxygen.”

Here we go, gang! Last one out is a pink chimpanzee!

“Halloway, come back, you damn fool! You’ll kill yourself!”

Feel the good sweet Earth! Home again! Praise the Lord! Let’s dance, sing off-key, laugh! Ha! Oh, boy!

In the door of the house stands the captain, his face red and wrinkled, waving his fists.

“Halloway, come back! Look behind you, you fool!”

I whirl about and cry out, happily.

Shep! Shep, old dog! He comes running to meet me, long fur shining amber in the sunshine. Barking. Shep, I haven’t seen you in years. Good old pooch. Come ’ere, Shep. Let me pet you.

The captain shrieks:

“Don’t pet it! It looks like a carnivorous Martian worm. Man, the jaws on that thing! Halloway, use your knife!”

Shep snarls and shows his teeth. Shep, what’s wrong? That’s no way to greet me. Come on, Shep. Hey! I pull back my fingers as his swift jaws snap. Shep circles me, swiftly. You haven’t rabies, have you, Shep? He darts in, snatches my ankle with strong, locking white teeth! Lord, Shep, you’re crazy! I can’t let this go on. And you used to be such a fine, beautiful dog. Remember all the hikes we took into the lazy corn country, by the red barns and deep wells? Shep clenches tight my ankle. I’ll give him one more chance. Shep, *let go!* Where did this long knife come from in my hand, like magic? Sorry to do this, Shep, but—*there!*

Shep screams, thrashing, screams again. My arm pumps up and down, my gloves are freckled with blood-flakes.

Don’t scream, Shep. I *said* I was sorry, didn’t I?

“Get out there, you men, and bury that beast immediately.”

I glare at the captain. Don’t talk that way about Shep.

The captain stares at my ankle.

“Sorry, Halloway. I meant, bury that ‘dog,’ you men. Give him full honors. You were lucky, son, another second and those knife-teeth’d bored through your ankle-cuff metal.”

I don’t know what he means. I’m wearing sneakers, sir.

“Oh, yeah, so you are. Yeah. Well, I’m sorry, Halloway. I know how you must feel about—Shep. He was a fine dog.”

I think about it a moment and my eyes fill up, wet.

There’ll be a picnic and a hike; the captain says. Three hours now the boys have carried luggage from the metal house. The way they talk, this’ll be some picnic. Some seem afraid, but who worries about copperheads and water-moccasins and crawfish? Not me. No, sir. Not me.

Gus Bartz, sweating beside me on some apparatus, squints at me.

“What’s eatin’ you, Halloway?”

I smile. Me? Nothing. Why?

“You and that act with that Martian worm.”

What’re you talking about? What worm?

The captain interrupts, nervously.

“Bartz, lay off Halloway. The doctor’ll explain why. Ask him.”

Bartz goes away, scratching his head.

The captain pats my shoulder.

“You’re our strong-arm man, Halloway. You’ve got muscles from working on the rocket engines. So keep alert today, eh, on your hike to look over the territory? Keep your—b.b. gun—ready.”

Beavers, do you think, sir?

The captain swallows hard and blinks.

“Unh—oh, beavers, yeah, beavers. Sure. Beavers! Maybe. Mountain lions and Indians, too, I hear. Never can tell. Be careful.”

Mountain lions and Indians in New York in this day and age? Aw, sir.

“Let it go. Keep alert, anyhow. Smoke?”

I don’t smoke, sir. A strong mind in a healthy body, you know the old rule.

“The old rule. Oh, *yes*. The *old* rule. Only joking. I don’t want a smoke anyway. Like hell.”

What was that last, sir?

“Nothing, Halloway, carry on, carry on.”

I help the others work, now. Are we taking the yellow street-car to the edge of town, Gus?

“We’re using propulsion belts, skimming low over the dead seas.”

How's that again, Gus?

"I said, we're takin' the yellow street-car to the end of the line, yeah."

We're ready. Everyone's packed, spreading out. We're going in groups of four. Down Main Street past the pie factory, over the bridge, through the tunnel, past the circus grounds and we'll rendezvous, says the captain, at a place he points to on a queer, disjointed map.

*Whoosh!* We're off! I forgot to pay my fare.

"That's okay, I paid it."

Thanks, captain. We're really traveling. The cypresses and the maples flash by. *Kaawhoom!* I wouldn't admit this to anyone but you, sir, but momentarily, there, I didn't see this street-car. Suddenly we moved in empty space, nothing supporting us, and I didn't see any car. But *now* I see it, sir.

The captain gazes at me as at a nine-day miracle.

"You do, eh?"

Yes, sir. I clutch upward. Here's the strap. I'm holding it.

"You look pretty funny sliding through the air with your hand up like that, Holloway."

How's that, sir?

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Why are the others laughing at me, sir?

"Nothing, son, nothing. Just happy, that's all."

*Ding Ding. Ding Ding.* Canal Street and Washington. *Ding Ding. Whoosh.* This is real traveling. Funny, though, the captain and his men keep moving, changing seats, never stay seated. It's a long street-car. I'm way in back now. They're up front.

By the large brown house on the next corner stands a popcorn wagon, yellow and red and blue. I can taste the popcorn in my mind. It's been a long time since I've eaten some ... if I ask the captain's permission to stop and buy a bag, he'll refuse. I'll just sneak off the car at the next stop. I can get back on the next car and catch up with the gang later.

How do you stop this car? My fingers fumble with my baseball outfit, doing something I don't want to know about. The car is stopping! Why's that. Popcorn is more important.

I'm off the car, walking. Here's the popcorn machine with a man behind it, fussing with little silver metal knobs.

*“—murr—lokk—loc—cor—iz—”*

*Tony!* Tony, bambino! What are you doing here?

*“Click.”*

It can't be, but it is. Tony, who died ten long years ago, when I was a freckled kid! Alive and selling popcorn again. Oh, Tony, it's good to see you. His black moustache's so waxed, so shining, his dark hair like burnt oily shavings, his dark shining happy eyes, his smiling red cheeks! He shimmers in my eyes like in a cold rain. Tony! Let me shake your hand! Gimme a bag of popcorn, senior!

*“Click-click-click—sput-click—reeeeee-eeeeeee—”*

The captain didn't see you, Tony, you were hidden so well, only *I* saw you. Just a moment while I search for my nickel.

*“Reeeeeee.”*

Whew, I'm dizzy. It's very hot. My heads spins like a leaf on a storm wind. Let me hold onto your wagon, Tony, quick, I'm shivering and I've got sharp needle head pains....

*“Reeeeeeee.”*

I'm running a temperature. I feel as if I have a torch hung flaming in my head.

Hotter. Pardon me for criticizing you, Tony, but I think its your popper turned up too high. Your face looks afraid, contorted, and your hands move so rapidly, why? Can't you shut it off? I'm hot. Everything melts. My knees sag.

Warmer still. He'd better turn that thing off, I can't take any more. I can't find my nickel anyhow. Please, snap it off, Tony, I'm sick. My uniform glows orange. I'll take fire!



Here, I'll turn it off for you, Tony.

You *hit* me!

Stop hitting me, stop clicking those knobs! It's hot, I tell you. Stop, or I'll—

Tony. Where are you? Gone.

Where did that purple flame shoot from? That loud blast, what was it? The flame seemed to stream from my hand, out of my scout flashlight. Purple flame—eating!

I smell a sharp bitter odor.

Like hamburger fried overlong.

I feel better now. Cool as winter. But—

Like a fly buzzing in my ears, a voice comes, faint, far off,

“Halloway, damn it, Halloway, where are you?”

Captain! It's his voice, sizzling. I don't see you, sir!

“Halloway, we're on the dead sea bottom near an ancient Martian city and—oh, never mind, dammit, if you hear me, press your boy-scout badge and yell!”

I press the badge intensely, sweating. Hey, captain!

“Halloway! Glory. You're *not* dead. Where are you?”

I stopped for popcorn, sir. I can't see you. How do I hear you?

“It's an echo. Let it go. If you're okay, grab the next street-car.”

That's very opportune. Because here comes a big red street-car now, around the corner of the drug store.

“*What!*”

Yes, sir, and its chock full of people. I'll climb aboard.

“Wait a minute! Hold on! Murder! What *kind* of people, dammit?”

It's the West Side gang. Sure. The whole bunch of tough kids.

"West side gang, hell, those are Martians, get the hell outa there! Transfer to another car—take the subway! Take the elevated!"

Too late. The car's stopped. I'll have to get on. The conductor looks impatient.

"Impatient," he says. "You'll be massacred!"

Oh, oh. Everybody's climbing from the street-car, looking angry at me. Kelly and Grogan and Tompkins and the others. I guess there'll be a fight.

The captain's voice stabs my ears, but I don't see him anywhere:

"Use your r-gun, your blaster, your blaster. Hell, use your slingshot, or throw spitballs, or whatever the devil you imagine you got holstered there, but *use* it! Come on, men, about face and back!"

I'm outnumbered. I bet they'll gang me and give me the bumps, the bumps, the bumps. I bet they'll truss me to a maple tree, maple tree, maple tree and tickle me. I bet they'll ink-tattoo their initials on my forehead. Mother won't like this.

The captain's voice opens up louder, driving nearer:

"And Poppa ain't happy! Get outa there, Holloway!"

They're hitting me, sir! We're battling!

"Keep it up, Holloway!"

I knocked one down, sir, with an upper-cut. I'm knocking another down now. Here goes a third! Someone's grabbed my ankle. I'll kick him! *There!* I'm stumbling, falling! Lights in my eyes, purple ones, big purple lightning bolts sizzling the air!

Three of them vanished, just like that!

I think they fell down a manhole.

I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt them bad.

They stole my flashlight.

“Get it back, Halloway! We’re coming. Get your flash and use it!” That’s silly.

“Silly,” he says. “Silly. Silly.”

I got my flashlight back, broken, no good. We’re wrestling. There are so many of them, I’m weak. They’re climbing all over me, hitting. It’s not fair, I’m falling down, kicking, screaming!

“Up speed, men, full power!”

They’re binding me up. I can’t move. They’re rushing me into the street-car now. Now I won’t be able to go on that hike. And I planned on it so hard, too.

*“Here we are, Halloway! Blast ’em, men! Oh, my Lord, look at the horrible faces on those creatures! Guh!”*

Watch out, captain! They’ll get you, too, and the others! *Ahh!* Somebody struck me on the back of my head. Darkness. Dark. Dark.

Rockabye baby on the tree-top ... when the wind blows....

“Okay, Halloway, *any* time. Just any old time you want to come to.”

Dark. A voice talking. Dark as a whale’s insides. Ouch, my head. I’m flat on my back, I can feel rocks under me.

“Good morning, *dear* Mr. Halloway.”

That you, captain, over in that dark corner?

“It ain’t the president of the United States!”

Where is this cave?

“Suppose *you* tell us, you got us into this mess with your eternally blasted popcorn! Why’d you get off the street-car?”

Did the West Side gang truss us up like this, captain?

“West Side gang, *goh!* Those faces, those inhuman, weird, unsavory and horrible faces. All loose-fleshed and—gangrenous. Aliens, the whole rotting clutch of ’em.”

What a funny way to talk.

“Listen, you parboiled idiot, in about an hour we’re going to be fried, gutted, iced, killed, slaughtered, murdered, we will be, ipso facto, dead. Your ‘friends’ are whipping up a little blood-letting jamboree. Can’t I shove it through your thick skull, we’re on Mars, about to be sliced and hammered by a lousy bunch of Martians!”

“Captain, sir?”

“Yes, Berman?”

“The cave door is opening, sir. I think the Martians are ready to have at us again, sir. Some sort of test or other, no doubt.”

“Let go a me, you one-eyed monster! I’m coming, don’t push!”

We’re outside the cave. They’re cutting our bonds. See, captain, they aren’t hurting us, after all. Here’s the brick alley. There’s Mrs. Haight’s underwear waving on the clothes-line. See all the people from the beer hall—what’re they waiting for?

“To see us die.”

“Captain, what’s wrong with Holloway, he’s acting queer—”

“At least he’s better off than us. He can’t see these creatures’ faces and bodies. It’s enough to turn a man’s stomach. This must be their amphitheatre. That looks like an obstacle course. I gather from their sign lingo that if we make it through the obstacles, we’re free. Footnote: nobody’s ever gotten through alive yet. Seems they want you to go first, Berman. Good luck, boy.”

“So long, captain. So long, Gus. So long, Holloway.”

Berman’s running down-alley with an easy, long-muscled stride. I hear him yelling high and clear, even though he’s getting far away.

Here comes an automobile!

Berman! Ahh! It hit him! He’s fallen!

Berman, get up, get up!

“Stay here, Halloway, it’s not your turn yet.”

My turn? What do you mean? Someone’s gotta help Berman.

“Halloway, come back! Oh, man, I don’t want to see this!”

Lift up my legs, put them down, breathe out, breathe in, swing arms, swing legs, chew my tongue, blink my eyes, Berman, here I come, gee, things are crazy-funny, here comes an ice-wagon trundling along, it’s coming right at *me*! I can’t see to get around it, it’s coming so fast, I’ll jump inside it, jump, jump, cool, ice, ice-pick, *chikk-chikk-chikk*, I hear the captain screaming off a million hot miles gone, *chikk-chikk-chikk* around the ice perimeter, the ice wagon is thundering, rioting, jouncing, shaking, rolling on big rusty iron wheels, smelling of sour ammonia, bouncing on a corduroy dirt and brick alley-road, the rear end of it seems to be snapping shut with many ice-prongs, I feel intense pain in my left leg, *chikk-chikk-chikk-chikk!* piece of ice, cold square, cold cube, a shuddering and convulsing, a temblor, the wagon wheels stop rolling, I jump down and run away from the wrecked wagon, did the wagon roll over Berman, I hope not, a fence here, I’ll jump over it, another popcorn machine, very warm, very hot, all flame and red fire and burning metal knobs....

Oops, I didn’t mean to strike the popcorn man down, hello, Berman, what’re you doing in my arms, how’d you get here, did I pick you up, and why? an obstacle race at the high-school? you’re heavy, I’m tired, dogs nipping at my heels, how far am I supposed to carry you? I hear the captain screaming me on, for why, for why? here comes the big bad truant officer with a club in his hand to take me back to school, he looks mean and broad....

I kicked the truant officer’s shins and kicked him in the face ... Mama won’t like that ... yes, mommy ... no mommy ... that’s unfair ... that’s not ethical fighting ... something went squish ... hmm ... let’s forget about it, shall we?

Breathing hard. Here comes the gang after me, all the rough, bristly Irishmen and scarred Norwegians and stubborn Italians ... hit, kick, wrestle ... here comes a swift car, fast, fast! I hope I can duck, with you, Berman ... here comes another car from the opposite way!... If I work things right ... uh ... stop screaming, Berman!

The cars crashed into each other.

The cars still roll, tumbling, like two animals tearing at each other’s throats.

Not far to go now, Berman, to the end of the alley. Just ahead. I'll sleep for forty years when this is over ... where'd I get this flashlight in my hand? from one of those guys I knocked down? from the popcorn man? I'll poke it in front of me ... people run away ... maybe they don't like its light in their eyes.... The end of the alley! There's the green valley and my house, and there's Mom and Pop waiting! Hey, let's sing, let's dance, we're going home!

"Halloway, you so-and-so, you did it!"

Dark. Sleep. Wake up slow. Listen.

"—and Halloway ran down that amphitheatre nonchalant as a high-school kid jumping hurdles. A big saffron Martian beast with a mouth so damn big it looked like the rear end of a delivery truck, lunged forward square at Halloway—"

"What'd Halloway do?"

"Halloway jumped right inside the monster's mouth—right inside!"

"What happened then?"

"The animal looked dumbfounded. It tried to spit out. Then, to top it all, what did Halloway do, I ask you, I ask you, what did he do? He drew forth his boy-scout blade and went *chikk-chikk-chikk* all around the bloody interior, pretending like he's holed up in an ice-wagon, chipping himself off pieces of ice."

"No?"

"On my honor! The monster, after taking a bit of this *chikk-chikk-chikk* business, leaped around, cavorting, floundering, rocking, tossing, and then, with a spout of blood, out popped Halloway, grinning like a kid, and on he ran, dodging spears and pretending they were pebbles, leaping a line of crouched warriors and saying they're a picket fence. Then he lifted Berman and trotted with him until he met a three hundred pound Martian wrestler. Halloway supposed that it was the truant officer and promptly kicked him in the face. Then he knocked down another guy working furiously at the buttons of a paralysis machine which looked, to Halloway, like a popcorn wagon! After which two gigantic black Martian leopards attacked, resembling to him nothing more than two very bad drivers in dark automobiles. Halloway sidestepped. The two 'cars' crashed and tore each other apart, fighting. Halloway pumped on, shooting people with his 'flashlight' which he retrieved from the 'popcorn' man. Pointing the flash at people, he was amazed when they vanished and—oh, oh, Halloway's waking up, I saw his eyelids flicker. Quiet, everyone. Halloway, you awake?"

Yeah. I been listening to you talk for five minutes. I still don't understand. Nothing

happened at all. How long I been asleep?

“Two days. Nothing happened, eh? Nothing, except you got the Martians kow-towing, that’s all, brother. Your spectacular performance impressed people. The enemy suddenly decided that if *one* earthman could do what you did, what would happen if a million more came?”

Everybody keeps on with this joking, this lying about Mars. Stop it. Where am I?

“Aboard the rocket, about to take off.”

Leave Earth? No, no, I don’t want to leave Earth, good green Earth! Let go! I’m afraid! Let go of me! Stop the ship!

“Halloway, *this* is Mars—we’re going back *to* Earth.”

Liars, all of you! I don’t want to go to Mars, I want to stay here, on Earth!

“Holy cow, here we go again. Hold him down, Gus. Hey, doctor, on the double! Come help Halloway change his mind back, willya!”

*Liars! You can’t do this! Liars! Liars!*

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