

Rocket Summer

Ray Bradbury

The crowd gathered to make a curious noise this cold grey morning before the scheduled Birth. They arrived in gleaming scarlet tumble-bugs and yellow plastic beetles, yawning and singing and ready. The Birth was a big thing for them.

He stood alone up in his high office tower window, watching them with a sad impatience in his grey eyes. His name was William Stanley, president of the company that owned this building and all those other work-hangars down on the tarmac, and all that landing field stretching two miles off into the Jersey mists. William Stanley was thinking about the Birth.

The Birth of *what*? Stanley's large, finely sculptured head felt heavier, older. Science, with a scalpel of intense flame would slash wide the skulls of engineers, chemists, mechanics in a titanic Caesarian, and out would come the Rocket!

"Yezzir! Yezzir!" he heard the far-off, faint and raucous declarations of the vendors and hawkers. "Buy ya Rocket Toys! Buy ya Rocket Games! Rocket Pictures! Rocket soap! Rocket teethers for the tiny-tot! Rocket, Rocket, Rocket! *Hey!*"

Shutting the open glassite frame before him, his thin lips drew tight. Morning after morning America sent her pilgrims to this shrine. They peered in over the translucent restraint barrier as if the Rocket were a caged beast.

He saw one small girl drop her Rocket toy. It shattered, and was folded under by the moving crowd's feet.

"Mr. Stanley?"

"Uh? Oh, Captain Greenwald. Sorry. Forgot you were here." Stanley measured his slow, thoughtful steps to his clean-topped desk. "Captain," he sighed wearily, "you're looking at the unhappiest man alive." He looked at Greenwald across the desk. "That Rocket is the gift of a too-generous science to a civilization of adult-children who've fiddled with dynamite ever since Nobel invented it. They—"

He got no further. The office door burst inward. A tall, work-grimed man strode swiftly in—all oil, all heat, all sunburnt, wrinkled leather skin. Rocket flame burnt in his dark, glaring eyes. He stopped short at Stanley's desk, breathing heavily, leaning against it.

Stanley noticed the wrench in the man's fist. "Hello, Simpson."

Simpson swore bitterly. “What’s all this guff about you stopping the Rocket tomorrow?” he demanded.

Stanley nodded. “This isn’t a good time for it to go up.”

Simpson snorted. “This isn’t a good time,” he mimicked. Then he swore again. “By George, it’s like telling a woman her baby’s been still-born!”

“I know it’s hard to understand—”

“Hard, *hell!*” shouted the man. “I’m Head Mechanic! I’ve worked two years! The others have worked, too! And the Rocket’ll travel tomorrow or we’ll know why!”

Stanley crushed out his cigar, inside his fist. The room swayed imperceptibly in his vision. Sometimes, one wanted to use a gun—he shook away the thought. He kept his tongue.

Simpson raged on. “Mr. Stanley, you have until three this afternoon to change your mind. We’ll pull strings and you’ll be out of your job by the week-end! If not—” and he said the next words very slowly, “how would your wife look with her head bashed in, *Mister Stanley?*”

“You can’t threaten me!”

The door slammed in Stanley’s face. Simpson was gone.

Captain Greenwald put out a manicured hand. On one slender finger shone a diamond ring. His wrist was circled by an expensive watch. His shiny brown eyes were invisibly cupped by contact lenses. Greenwald was past fifty inside; outside he seemed barely thirty. “I advise you to forget it, Stanley. Man’s waited a million years for tomorrow.”

Stanley’s hand shook, lighting a cigarette. “Look here, Captain, where *are* you going?”

“To the stars, of course.”

Stanley snapped out the alcohol match. “In the name of heaven, stop the melodrama and inferior semantics. What kind of thing is this you’re handing the people? What’ll it do to races, morals, men and women?”

Greenwald laughed. “I’m only interested in reaching the Moon. Then I’ll come back to earth,

and retire, happily, and die.”

Stanley stood there, tall and very grey. “Does the effect of the introduction of the crossbow to English and French history interest you?”

“Can’t say I know much about it.”

“Do you recall what gunpowder’s invention did to civilization?”

“That’s irrelevant!”

“You must admit if there’d been some subjective planning with the auto and airplane, millions of lives would’ve been saved, and many wars prevented. An ethical code should’ve been written for all such inventions and strictly observed, or else the invention forfeited.”

Greenwald shook his head, grinning. “I’ll let you handle that half of it. I’ll do the traveling. I’m willing to abide by any such rules, if you’ll draw them up and enforce them. All I want is to reach the Moon first. I’ve got to get downstairs now. We’re still loading the ship, you know, in spite of your decree. We expect to get around you somehow. I’m sympathetic, of course, to your beliefs. I’ll do anything you say except ground the Rocket. I won’t get violent, but I can’t vouch for Simpson. He’s a tough man, with strong notions.”

They walked from the office to the dropper. Compression slid them down to ground level, where they stepped out, Stanley still re-emphasizing his beliefs. “—for centuries science has given humanity play-toys, ships, machines, guns, cars, and now a Rocket, all with supreme disregard for man’s needs.”

“Science,” announced Greenwald as they emerged onto the tarmac, “has produced, via private enterprise, greater amounts of goods than ever in history! Why, consider the medical developments!”

“Yes,” said Stanley doggedly, “we cure man’s cancer and preserve his greed in a special serum. They used to say ‘Starve a cold, stuff a fever.’ Today’s fever is materialism. All the things science has produced only touch the *Body*. When Science invents something to touch the Mind, I’ll give it its due. No.

“You cloak your voyage with romantic terminology. Outward to the stars! you cry! Words! What’s the *fact*? Why, *why* this rocket? Greater production? We have *that*! Adventure? Poor excuse to uproot Earth. Exploration? It *could* wait a few years. Lebensraum? Hardly. *Why*, then, Captain?”

“Eh?” murmured Greenwald distractedly. “Ah. Here’s the Rocket, now.”

They walked in the incredible Rocket shadow. Stanley looked at the crowd beyond the barrier. “*Look* at them. Their sex still a mixture of Victorian voodoo and clabbered Freud. With education needing reorientation, with wars threatening, with religion and philosophy confused, you want to jump off into space!”

Stanley shook his head. “Oh, I don’t doubt your sincerity, Captain. I just say your timing’s poor. If we give them a Rocket toy to play with, do you honestly think they’ll solve war, education, unity, thought? Why, they’d propel themselves away from it so quickly your head’d swim! Wars would be fought between worlds. But if we want more wars, let’s have them *here*, where we can get at their sources, before we leap to the asteroids seeking our lost pride of race.

“What little unity we *do* have would be broken by countries and individuals clamoring and cut-throating for planets and satellites!”

Pausing, Stanley saw the mechanics standing in the Rocket shadow, hating him. Outside the barrier, the crowd recognized him; their murmur grew to a roar of disapproval.

Greenwald indicated them. “They’re wondering why you waited so long before deciding to stop the Rocket.”

“Tell them I thought there’d be laws controlling it. Tell them the corporations played along, smiling and bobbing to me, until the Rocket was completed. Then they threw off their false faces and withdrew the legislation only this morning. Tell them that, Captain. And tell them the legislation I planned would’ve meant a slow, intelligent Rocket expansion over an era of three centuries. Then ask them if they think any business man could wait even five *minutes*.”

Captain Greenwald scowled. “All I want to do is prove it can be done. After I come back down, if I can help in any way to control the Rocket, I’m your man, Stanley. After I *prove* it’s possible, I don’t care what in hell happens....”

Stanley slid into his ’copter, waved morosely at the captain. The crowd shouted, waved its fists at him over the barrier. He sat watching their distorted, sullen faces. They detested him. The Rocket balloon man, the Rocket soap man, the tourists detested him.

What was more, when his son Tommy found out, Tommy would hate him, too.

He took his time, heading home. He let the green hills slide under. He set the automatic

pilot and sank back into the sponge-softness, suspended in a humming, blissful dream. Music played. Cigarettes and whiskey were in reach if he desired them. Soft music. He could lapse back into the dreaming tide, dissolve worry, smoke, drink, chortle, luxuriously, sleep, forget, pull a shell of synthetic, hypnotizing objects in about himself.

And wake ten years from today with his wife disintegrating swiftly in his arms. And one day see his son's skull shattered against a plastic wall.

And his own heart whirled and burst by some vast atom power of a starship passing Earth far out in space!

He dumped the whiskey over the side, followed it with the cigarettes. Finally, he clicked off the soft music.

There was his home. His eyes kindled. It lay out upon a green meadow, far from the villages and towns, salt-white and surrounded by tapered sycamores. As he watched, lowering his 'copter, he saw the blonde streak across the lawn; that was his daughter, Alyce. Somewhere else on the premises his son gamboled. Neither of them feared the dark.

Angrily, Stanley poured on full speed. The landscape jerked and vanished behind him. He wanted to be alone. He couldn't face them, yet. Speed was the answer. Wind whistled, roared, rushed by the hurtling 'copter. He rammed it on. Color rose in his cheeks.

There was music in the garden as he parked his 'copter in the fine blue plastic garage. Oh, beautiful garage, he thought, you contribute to my peacefulness. Oh, wonderful garage, in moments of torment, I think of you, and I am glad I own you.

Like hell.

In the kitchen, Althea was whipping food with mechanisms. Her mother sat with one withered ear to the latest audio drama. They glanced up, pleased.

"Darling, so early!" she cried, kissing him. "How's the Rocket?" piped mother-in-law. "My, I bet you're proud!"

Stanley said nothing.

"Just imagine." The old woman's eyes glowed like little bulbs. "Soon we'll breakfast in New York and supper on Mars!"

Stanley watched her for a long moment, then turned hopefully to Althea. "What do *you* think?"

She sensed a trap. “Well, it would be different, wouldn’t it, vacationing our summers on Venus, winters on Mars—wouldn’t it?”

“Oh, good Lord,” he groaned. He shut his eyes and pounded the table, softly. “Good Lord.”

“*Now*, what’s wrong. What did *I* say?” demanded Althea, bewildered.

He told them about his order preventing the flight.

Althea stared at him. Mother reached and snapped off the audio. “*What* did you say, young man?”

He repeated it.

Into the waiting silence came a distant “psssheelow!” rushing in from the dining room, flinging the kitchen door wide, his son ran in, waving a bright red Rocket in one grimy fist. “Psssheelow! I’m a Rocket! Gangway! Hi, Dad!” He swung the ship in a quick arc. “Gonna be a pilot when I’m sixteen! Hey.” He stopped. “What’s everybody standing around for?” He looked at Grandma. “Grammy?” He looked at his mother. “Mom?” And finally at his father. “Dad...?” His hands sank slowly. He read the look in his father’s eyes. “Oh, gosh.”

By three o’clock that afternoon, he had showered and dressed in clean clothes. The house was very silent. Althea came and sat down in the living room and looked at him with hurt, stricken eyes.

He thought of quoting a few figures at her. Five million people killed in auto accidents since the year 1920. Fifty thousand people killed every year, *now*, in ’copters and jet-planes. But it wasn’t in the figures, it was in a feeling he had to make her *feel*. Maybe he could illustrate it to her. He picked up the hand-audio, dialed a number. “Hello, Smitty?”

The voice on the other end said, clearly, “Oh, Mr. Stanley?”

“Smitty, you’re a good average man, a pleasant neighbor, a fine farmer. I’d like your opinion. Smitty, if you knew a war was coming, would you help prevent it?”

Althea was watching and listening.

Smitty said, “Hell, yes. Sure.”

“Thanks, Smitty. One more thing. What’s your opinion of the Rocket?”

“Greatest thing in history. Say, I heard you were going to—”

Stanley did not want to get involved. He hurriedly excused himself and hung up. He looked directly at his wife. “Did you notice the separation of means from end? Smitty thinks two things. He thinks he can prevent war; that’s one. He thinks the Rocket is a great thing; that’s number two. But they don’t match, unfortunately.

“The Rocket isn’t a means to happiness the way it’ll be used. It’s the wrong means. And with a wrong means you invariably wind up with a wrong end. A criminal seeks wealth. Does he get it? Temporarily. In the end, he suffers. All because he took the wrong *means*.” Stanley held his hands out, uselessly. “How can I make you understand.”

Tears were in her eyes. “I understand *nothing*, and don’t need to understand! Your job, they’ll take it away from you and fly the Rocket anyway!”

“I’ll work on the legislation again, then!”

“And perhaps be killed? No, please, Will.”

Killed. He looked at his watch. Exactly three.

He answered the audio when it buzzed. “Stanley talking.”

“Stanley, this is Cross, at Cal-Tech.”

“Cross! Good Lord, it’s good to hear you!”

“I just heard the new-flash,” said Cross. He had the same clipped, exact voice he’d had years ago, Stanley realized. “You’re really on the spot this time, aren’t you, Will? That’s why I called. I like your ideas on machinery. I’ve always thought of machines, myself, as nothing but extensions of man’s frustrations and emotions, his losses and compensations in life. We agree. But you’re wrong this time, Will. You made a mistake today.”

“Now, don’t *you* start on me! You’re my last friend,” retorted Stanley tiredly. “What else could I do—destroy the rocket?”

“That would be negative. No good. Give them something positive. Tell them to go ahead,” advised Cross, pleasantly enough. “Warn them, like a kindly father, of the consequences. Then, when their fingers are burnt—”

“Humanity might go down the drain,” finished Stanley abruptly.

“Not if you play your cards right, control the variables. There must be some way around them without getting yourself mangled. I’m ready to help when you have a plan. Think it over.”

“I still think blowing the damn thing up would be—”

“They’d build a bigger one. And they’d persecute you and your family the rest of your life,” explained Cross logically. “You and I may know that science hasn’t contributed one whit to man’s *mental* progress, but Mr. Everyman likes his babies diapered in disposable tissues and likes to travel from Siberia to Johnstown like an infuriated bullet. You can’t stop them, you can only divert them a bit.”

Stanley grasped the hand-audio, tightly. He listened.

A great roar of ’copters sounded out in the afternoon sky, directly overhead. The house shook. Althea sprang up lithely and ran to look out. “I can’t talk any more, Cross. I’ll call you back. *They’re* outside, waiting for me, now....”

Cross’ voice faded like a dream. “Remember what I tell you. Let them go ahead.”

Stanley walked to the door, opened it, stepped half through.

A radio voice boomed out of the bright blue sky.

“STANLEY!” it shouted. It was Simpson’s voice. “STANLEY! COME OUT AND TALK! COME OUT AND TELL US, STANLEY! STANLEY!”

Althea would not stay in. She walked with him out onto the moist green lawn, in the open.

The heavens were flooded with ’copters whirling. The sun shook in its place. ’Copters hung everywhere, like huge hummingbirds, swiveling, whirring. Five hundred of them, at least, shadowing the lawns and shaking the house-tops.

“OH, *THERE* YOUR ARE, STANLEY!”

Stanley shaded his eyes. His lips drew away from his teeth in a grimace, as he stared upward, tense and afraid.

“IT’S AFTER THREE O’CLOCK, STANLEY!” came the dull boom of words.

In this moment, with the spiraling ’copters suspended over his lawn, over his wife and children and house, over himself and his beliefs, Stanley swallowed, stepped back, put his hands down and let the idea grow within him. Yes, he would give them their rocket. He would give it to them. You cannot fight the children, he thought. They must have their green apples. If you refuse them, they will find a way around you. Go along with their illogical tide and make logic of it. Let the children eat their full of green apples, many, many green apples to swell their vast stomach into sickness. Yes. A slow smile touched the corners of his mouth, vanished. The plan was complete.

The voice from the sky fell on him like an iron fist! “STANLEY! WHAT IS YOUR WORD NOW? HOW WILL YOU SPEAK NOW? WITH A THOUSAND POUNDS OF NITROGLYCERINE OVER YOUR HOME, HOW WILL YOU TALK?”

The ’copters sank, malignantly. Thunder swept the lawn. Althea’s brilliant amber skirt flared in the wash of it.

“WILL THE ROCKET FLY, STANLEY?”

From the corners of his aching, straining eyes, Stanley saw his son poised in the window, watching him.

“RAISE YOUR RIGHT HAND AND WAVE IT,” thundered the sky-voice. “IF THE ANSWER IS YES!”

Stanley made them wait for it. He wetted his lips with a slow tongue, then, gradually, very casually, he raised his right hand, palm up, and waved it to the thundering sky.

A torrent of exultation poured in a Niagara from the heavens. Five hundred audios blasted, cheered, exulted! The trees ripped and tore in the cyclone of energy and explosion! The noise continued as Stanley turned, took Althea’s elbow, and steered her blindly back to the door.

The little black-jet-plane dropped out of the midnight stars. Moments later, Cross was getting out of it, crossing the dark lawn, grasping Stanley’s hand warmly. “Made good time, eh?”

Inside, they downed their glasses of brandy first, then got to business. Stanley outlined his plan, his contacts, his psychology. He was pleased and excited to see an extraordinary smile

of approval come to Cross's pink, round face. "Excellent! Now you're talking!" cried Cross.

"I like your plan, Stanley. It places the blame right back on the people. They won't be able to persecute you."

Stanley refilled the glasses. "I'll see to it you're on the Rocket tomorrow. Greenwald—he's the captain—will co-operate, I'm certain, when the trip is over. It's up to you and Greenwald then."

They raised their glasses. "And when it's all over," observed Cross slowly. "We'll have the long, hard struggle to revise our educational system. To begin to apply the scientific method to man's thinking, instead of just to his machines. And when we've built a logical subjective world, then it'll be safe to make machines of all and any kinds. Here's to our plan, may it be completed." They drank.

The next day two million people spread over the rolling hills, through the tiny Jersey towns, sitting atop bugs and plastic beetles. An excitement pervaded the day. The sky was a blue vacuum, the 'copters grounded by law. The Rocket lay gleaming and monstrous and silent.

At noon, the crew ambled across the tarmac, Captain Greenwald leading. Cross walked among them. The huge metal doors slammed, and with a blast of Gargantuan flame, the Rocket heaved upward and vanished.

People cheered and laughed and cried.

Stanley watched his son and daughter and mother-in-law do likewise. He was deeply pleased to see that Althea did not join them. Hand in hand they watched the sky dazzlement fade. The first Rocket to the moon was gone. The world was drunkenly happy in its delirium.

Two weeks passed slowly. Astronomers were unable to keep an eye on the Rocket. It was so small and unaccountable in the void between earth and lunar surface.

Stanley slept little in the passing of the fourteen days. He was constantly attacked by fears and confusions of thought. He dreamed of the Rocket going up. He had seen men month on month walking in the metal shadow of their wonderful Rocket, patting it with their greasy, calloused hands, loving it with their quick, appreciative eyes.

If for one moment you let yourself think of it, you loved it, too, for even though it symbolized wars and destruction, you had to admire its balance and slenderness of structure. With it, you could rub away the fog cosmetic of Venus, re-delineate its prehistorically shy face. And there was Mars, too. Man had been imprisoned a million years.

Why not freedom now, at last?

Then he labeled all these fantasies by their correct name, ESCAPE, and settled back, to wait the return of the Rocket.

“The moon Rocket is returning! It will land this morning at nine o’clock!” Everybody’s audio was blating.

Like a yellow seed, the Rocket dropped down the sky, to sprout roots of flame on which to cushion itself. It fried the tarmac and a vast deluge of warm air rushed across the country for miles. People sweltered amidst a sudden rocket summer.

In his tower room, William Stanley watched, solemn and wordless.

The Rocket shimmered. Across the cooling tarmac, the crowd rioted, bursting through the barrier, sweeping the police aside in elation.

The tide halted and boiled and changed form, layer upon layer. A vast hush came upon it.

Now the round air-lock door of the Rocket jetted out air in a compressed sigh.

The thick door, sandwiched into the ship-hull, took two minutes to come outward and pull aside on its oiled hingework. The crowd pressed closer, flesh to flesh, eyes widened. The door was now open completely. A great cheer went up. The crew of the Moon Rocket stood in the air-lock. The cheer faded, almost instantly.

The crew of the Rocket were not exactly standing. They were hunched over.

The captain stepped forward. Well, he didn’t exactly *step*. He sort of dragged his feet and shambled. He made a speech.

But all it sounded like, coming from his twisted, swollen lips, was, “Uns—rrrr—oh—god—disss—ease—unh—rrr—nnn—”

He held out his grey-green fingers, raw, bleeding, for all to see. He lifted his face. Those red things, were they actually eyes? That depression, that fallen socket, had it been a nose? And where were the teeth in that gagging, hissing mouth? His hair was thin and grey and infected. He stank.

The hypnotic silence was shattered. The first line of people turned and clawed at the second

line. The second turned instinctively to claw the third, and so on. The television cameras caught it all.

Screams, yelling, shouting. Many fell and were trampled, crushed under. The captain and his crew came out, gesturing, calling them to come back. But who would heed their rotting movements? The ridiculous souvenir seekers trampled each other, ripping the clothes from one another's backs!

A souvenir? A scab of crawling flesh, a drop of yellow fluid from their gaping wounds? Souvenirs for earth, buy them right here, get them while they last! We mail anywhere in the United States!

The characters in order of appearance: The Captain, the astrogator, held sagging between two astronomers, who were followed by sixteen mathematicians, technicians, chemists, biologists, radio men, geographers and machinists. Shamble forth, gentlemen, and bring the brave new future with you!

The balloon vendor, in flight, jettisoned his entire stock. Rubber rockets floated wildly, crazily bobbling, bouncing the river of rioting heads until they were devoured, exploded and crumpled underfoot.

Sirens sounded. Police beetles rushed to the field exits. Ten minutes later the tarmac was empty. No sign of captain or crew. A few shreds of their fetid clothing were found, partially disintegrated. An audio-report five minutes later stated simply, "The captain and crew were destroyed on orders of the health bureau! An epidemic was feared—"

The sounds of riot faded. The door to Stanley's office opened, someone entered and stood behind him, and closed the door.

Stanley did not turn from the window for a moment. "Fifty people injured, five of them critically. I'm sorry for that. But it was a small price for the world's security." He turned, slowly.

A horrible creature stood, diseased and swollen, before him. A captain's uniform, filthy and torn, hung tattered from the disgusting flesh. The creature opened its bleeding mouth.

"How was it?" asked the creature, muffledly.

"Fine," said Stanley. "Did you reach the moon?"

“Yes,” replied the creature. “Captain Greenwald sends his regards to you. He says he knows we can do it again and again, any time we want, now, and that’s all he wanted to know. He wishes you luck and tells you to go ahead. We landed the rocket on the way back from the moon, first of all, up at Fairbanks, Alaska, outside the settlement, naturally, during the night. Things worked as you planned them. We changed crews there. There was a minor fight. Simpson and the original crew, including Captain Greenwald, are still up there, under psycho-hypnosis. They’ll live out their lives happily, unaware, with new names. They won’t remember anything. We took off from Fairbanks again this morning with the new crew and our act all rehearsed, I think we did all right.”

“Where’s the substitute crew now?” inquired Stanley.

“Downstairs,” said the creature. “Getting psychoed themselves. Getting mental blocs inserted, so they’ll forget they ever fooled the world today. Then we’ll send them back to their regular jobs. Can I use your shower?”

Stanley pressed a button, a panel slid aside. “Go ahead.”

The creature pulled its face around the edges until it shed off into its hands, a green-grey pallid mask of plastic rubber. The sweating pink face of Cross appeared. He wriggled his fingers next, until the green-gray, chemically bleeding horror gloves sucked off. He tossed these into a wall-incinerator. “The day of the Rocket is over,” he said, quietly. “They’ll be putting your bill up before the World Legislature tomorrow, or I miss my guess. Carefulness, thought and intellect will now get a start. Humanity is saved from itself.”

Stanley watched Cross walk into the shower-cube, peel, and switch on the spray.

He turned to the window again. Two billion people were thinking tonight. He knew what they were thinking. Outside, he heard the explosion as the health department blew up the great Rocket.

That was all. The sound of water on the shower-tiles was a good clean sound.

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