

June 2003: Way in the Middle of the Air, Ray Bradbury

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“Did you hear about it?”

“About what?”

“The niggers, the niggers!”

“What about ‘em?”

“Them leaving, pulling out, going away; did you hear?”

“What you mean, pulling out? How can they do that?”

“They can, they will, they are.”

“Just a couple?”

“Every single one here in the South!”

“No.”

“Yes!”

“I got to see that. I don’t believe it. Where they going—Africa?”

A silence.

“Mars.”

“You mean the planet Mars?”

“That’s right.”

The men stood up in the hot shade of the hardware porch. Someone quit lighting a pipe. Somebody else spat out into the hot dust of noon.

“They can’t leave, they can’t do that.”

“They’re doing it, anyways.”

“Where’d you hear this?”

“It’s everywhere, on the radio a minute ago, just come through.”

Like a series of dusty statues, the men came to life.

Samuel Teece, the hardware proprietor, laughed uneasily. “I wondered what happened to Silly. I sent him on my bike an hour ago. He ain’t

come back from Mrs. Bordman's yet. You think that black fool just pedaled off to Mars?"

The men snorted.

"All I say is, he better bring back my bike. I don't take stealing from no one, by God."

"Listen!"

The men collided irritably with each other, turning.

Far up the street the levee seemed to have broken. The black warm waters descended and engulfed the town. Between the blazing white banks of the town stores, among the tree silences, a black tide flowed. Like a kind of summer molasses, it poured turgidly forth upon the cinnamon-dusty road.

It surged slow, slow, and it was men and women and horses and barking dogs, and it was little boys and girls. And from the mouths of the people partaking of this tide came the sound of a river.

A summer-day river going somewhere, murmuring and irrevocable. And in that slow, steady channel of darkness that cut across the white glare of day were touches of alert white, the eyes, the ivory eyes staring ahead, glancing aside, as the river, the long and endless river, took itself from old channels into a new one.

From various and uncountable tributaries, in creeks and brooks of color and motion, the parts of this river had joined, become one mother current, and flowed on.

And brimming the swell were things carried by the river: grandfather clocks chiming, kitchen clocks ticking, caged hens screaming, babies wailing; and swimming among the thickened eddies were mules and cats, and sudden excursions of burst mattress springs floating by, insane hair stuffing sticking out, and boxes and crates and pictures of dark grandfathers in oak frames—the river flowing it on while the men

sat like nervous hounds on the hardware porch, too late to mend the levee, their hands empty.

Samuel Teece wouldn't believe it. "Why, hell, where'd they get the transportation? How they goin' to get to Mars?"

"Rockets," said Grandpa Quartermain.

"All the damn-fool things. Where'd they get rockets?"

"Saved their money and built them."

"I never heard about it."

"Seems these niggers kept it secret, worked on the rockets all themselves, don't know where—in Africa, maybe."

"Could they do that?" demanded Samuel Teece, pacing about the porch. "Ain't there a law?"

"It ain't as if they're declarin' war," said Grandpa quietly.

"Where do they get off, God damn it, workin' in secret, plottin'?" shouted Teece.

"Schedule is for all this town's niggers to gather out by Loon Lake. Rockets be there at one o'clock, pick 'em up, take 'em to Mars."

"Telephone the governor, call out the militia," cried Teece. "They should've given notice!"

"Here comes your woman, Teece."

The men turned again.

As they watched, down the hot road in the windless light first one white woman and then another arrived, all of them with stunned faces, all of them rustling like ancient papers. Some of them were crying, some were stern.

All came to find their husbands. They pushed through barroom swing doors, vanishing. They entered cool, quiet groceries. They went in at drug shops and garages. And one of them, Mrs. Clara Teece, came to

stand in the dust by the hardware porch, blinking up at her stiff and angry husband as the black river flowed full behind her.

“It’s Lucinda, Pa; you got to come home!”

“I’m not comin’ home for no damn darkie!”

“She’s leaving. What’ll I do without her?”

“Fetch for yourself, maybe. I won’t get down on my knees to stop her.”

“But she’s like a family member,” Mrs. Teece moaned.

“Don’t shout! I won’t have you blubberin’ in public this way about no goddamn—”

His wife’s small sob stopped him. She dabbed at her eyes. “I kept telling her, ‘Lucinda,’ I said, ‘you stay on and I raise your pay, and you get two nights off a week, if you want,’ but she just looked set!

I never seen her so set, and I said, ‘Don’t you love me, Lucinda?’ and she said yes, but she had to go because that’s the way it was, is all. She cleaned the house and dusted it and put luncheon on the table and then she went to the parlor door and—and stood there with two bundles, one by each foot, and shook my hand and said, ‘Good-bye, Mrs. Teece.’ And she went out the door. And there was her luncheon on the table, and all of us too upset to even eat it. It’s still there now, I know; last time I looked it was getting cold.”

Teece almost struck her. “God damn it, Mrs. Teece, you get the hell home. Standin’ there makin’ a sight of yourself!”

“But, Pa . . .”

He strode away into the hot dimness of the store. He came back out a few seconds later with a silver pistol in his hand.

His wife was gone.

The river flowed black between the buildings, with a rustle and a creak and a constant whispering shuffle. It was a very quiet thing, with a

great certainty to it; no laughter, no wildness, just a steady, decided, and ceaseless flow.

Teece sat on the edge of his hardwood chair. "If one of 'em so much as laughs, by Christ, I'll kill 'em."

The men waited.

The river passed quietly in the dreamful noon.

"Looks like you goin' to have to hoe your own turnips, Sam," Grandpa chuckled.

"I'm not bad at shootin' white folks neither." Teece didn't look at Grandpa. Grandpa turned his head away and shut up his mouth.

"Hold on there!" Samuel Teece leaped off the porch. He reached up and seized the reins of a horse ridden by a tall Negro man. "You, Belter, come down off there!"

"Yes, sir." Belter slid down.

Teece looked him over. "Now, just what you think you're doin'?"

"Well, Mr. Teece . . ."

"I reckon you think you're goin', just like that song—what's the words?"

'Way up in the middle of the air'; ain't that it?"

"Yes, sir." The Negro waited.

"You recollect you owe me fifty dollars, Belter?"

"Yes, sir."

"You tryin' to sneak out? By God, I'll horsewhip you!"

"All the excitement, and it slipped my mind, sir."

"It slipped his mind." Teece gave a vicious wink at his men on the hardware porch. "God damn, mister, you know what you're goin' to do?"

"No, sir."

“You’re stayin’ here to work out that fifty bucks, or my name ain’t Samuel W. Teece.” He turned again to smile confidently at the men in the shade.

Belter looked at the river going along the street, that dark river flowing and flowing between the shops, the dark river on wheels and horses and in dusty shoes, the dark river from which he had been snatched on his journey. He began to shiver. “Let me go, Mr. Teece. I’ll send your money from up there, I promise!”

“Listen, Belter.” Teece grasped the man’s suspenders like two harp strings, playing them now and again, contemptuously, snorting at the sky, pointing one bony finger straight at God. “Belter, you know anything about what’s up there?”

“What they tells me.”

“What they tells him! Christ! Hear that? What they tells him!” He swung the man’s weight by his suspenders, idly, ever so casual, flicking a finger in the black face. “Belter, you fly up and up like a July Fourth rocket, and bang! There you are, cinders, spread all over space. Them crackpot scientists, they don’t know nothin’, they kill you all off!”

“I don’t care.”

“Glad to hear that. Because you know what’s up on that planet Mars? There’s monsters with big raw eyes like mushrooms! You seen them pictures on those future magazines you buy at the drugstore for a dime, ain’t you? Well! Them monsters jump up and suck marrow from your bones!”

“I don’t care, don’t care at all, don’t care.” Belter watched the parade slide by, leaving him. Sweat lay on his dark brow. He seemed about to collapse.

“And it’s cold up there; no air, you fall down, jerk like a fish, gaspin’, dyin’, stranglin’, stranglin’ and dyin’. You like that?”

“Lots of things I don’t like, sir. Please, sir, let me go. I’m late.”

“I’ll let you go when I’m ready to let you go. We’ll just talk here polite until I say you can leave, and you know it damn well. You want to travel, do you? Well, Mister Way up in the Middle of the Air, you get the hell home and work out that fifty bucks you owe me! Take you two months to do that!”

“But if I work it out, I’ll miss the rocket, sir!”

“Ain’t that a shame now?” Teece tried to look sad.

“I give you my horse, sir.”

“Horse ain’t legal tender. You don’t move until I get my money.” Teece laughed inside. He felt very warm and good.

A small crowd of dark people had gathered to hear all this. Now as Belter stood, head down, trembling, an old man stepped forward.

“Mister?”

Teece flashed him a quick look. “Well?”

“How much this man owe you, mister?”

“None of your damn business!”

The old man looked at Belter. “How much, son?”

“Fifty dollars.”

The old man put out his black hands at the people around him. “There’s twenty-five of you. Each give two dollars; quick now, this no time for argument.”

“Here, now!” cried Teece, stiffening up, tall, tall.

The money appeared. The old man fingered it into his hat and gave the hat to Belter. “Son,” he said, “you ain’t missin’ no rocket.”

Belter smiled into the hat. “No, sir, I guess I ain’t!”

Teece shouted: “You give that money back to them!”

Belter bowed respectfully, handing the money over, and when Teece would not touch it he set it down in the dust at Teece’s feet. “There’s your money, sir,” he said. “Thank you kindly.” Smiling, he gained the

saddle of his horse and whipped his horse along, thanking the old man, who rode with him now until they were out of sight and hearing.

“Son of a bitch,” whispered Teece, staring blind at the sun. “Son of a bitch.”

“Pick up the money, Samuel,” said someone from the porch.

It was happening all along the way. Little white boys, barefoot, dashed up with the news. “Them that has helps them that hasn’t! And that way they all get free! Seen a rich man give a poor man two hundred bucks to pay off some’un! Seen some’un else give some’un else ten bucks, five bucks, sixteen, lots of that, all over, everybody!”

The white men sat with sour water in their mouths. Their eyes were almost puffed shut, as if they had been struck in their faces by wind and sand and heat.

The rage was in Samuel Teece. He climbed up on the porch and glared at the passing swarms. He waved his gun. And after a while when he had to do something, he began to shout at anyone, any Negro who looked up at him. “Bang!

There’s another rocket out in space!” he shouted so all could hear. “Bang! By God!” The dark heads didn’t flicker or pretend to hear, but their white eyes slid swiftly over and back. “Crash! All them rockets fallin’! Screamin’, dyin’! Bang! God Almighty, I’m glad I’m right here on old terra firma. As they says in that old joke, the more firma, the less terra! Ha, ha!”

Horses clopped along, shuffling up dust. Wagons bumped on ruined springs.

“Bang!” His voice was lonely in the heat, trying to terrify the dust and the blazing sun sky. “Wham! Niggers all over space! Jerked outa rockets like so many minnows hit by a meteor, by God! Space fulla meteors. You know that? Sure!

Thick as buckshot; powie! Shoot down them tin-can rockets like so many ducks, so many clay pipes! Ole sardine cans full of black cod! Bangin' like a stringa ladyfingers, bang, bang, bang! Ten thousand dead here, ten thousand there. Floatin' in space, around and around earth, ever and ever, cold and way out, Lord! You hear that, you there!"

Silence. The river was broad and continuous. Having entered all cotton shacks during the hour, having flooded all the valuables out, it was now carrying the clocks and the washboards, the silk bolts and curtain rods on down to some distant black sea.

High tide passed. It was two o'clock. Low tide came. Soon the river was dried up, the town silent, the dust settling in a film on the stores, the seated men, the tall hot trees.

Silence.

The men on the porch listened.

Hearing nothing, they extended their thoughts and their imaginations out and out into the surrounding meadows. In the early morning the land had been filled with its usual concoctions of sound. Here and there, with stubborn persistence to custom, there had been voices singing, the honey laughter under the mimosa branches, the pickaninnies rushing in clear water laughter at the creek, movements and bendings in the fields, jokes and shouts of amusement from the shingle shacks covered with fresh green vine.

Now it was as if a great wind had washed the land clean of sounds. There was nothing. Skeleton doors hung open on leather hinges. Rubber-tire swings hung in the silent air, uninhibited.

The washing rocks at the river were empty, and the watermelon patches, if any, were left alone to heat their hidden liquors in the sun. Spiders started building new webs in abandoned huts; dust started to sift in from unpatched roofs in golden spicules. Here and there a fire, forgotten in the last rush, lingered and in a sudden access of strength fed upon the dry bones of some littered shack. The sound of a gentle feeding burn went up through the silenced air.

The men sat on the hardware porch, not blinking or swallowing.

“I can’t figure why they left now. With things lookin’ up. I mean, every day they got more rights. What they want, anyway? Here’s the poll tax gone, and more and more states passin’ anti-lynchin’ bills, and all kinds of equal rights. What more they want? They make almost as good money as a white man, but there they go.”

Far down the empty street a bicycle came.

“I’ll be goddamned, Teece, here comes your Silly now.”

The bicycle pulled up before the porch, a seventeen-year-old colored boy on it, all arms and feet and long legs and round watermelon head. He looked up at Samuel Teece and smiled.

“So you got a guilty conscience and came back,” said Teece.

“No, sir, I just brought the bicycle.”

“What’s wrong, couldn’t get it on the rocket?”

“That wasn’t it, sir.”

“Don’t tell me what it was! Get off, you’re not goin’ to steal my property!” He gave the boy a push. The bicycle fell. “Get inside and start cleaning the brass.”

“Beg pardon?” The boy’s eyes widened.

“You heard what I said. There’s guns need unpacking there, and a crate of nails just come from Natchez—”

“Mr. Teece.”

“And a box of hammers need fixin’—”

“Mr. Teece, sir?”

“You still standin’ there!” Teece glared.

“Mr. Teece, you don’t mind I take the day off,” he said apologetically.

“And tomorrow and day after tomorrow and the day after the day after that,” said Teece.

"I'm afraid so, sir."

"You should be afraid, boy. Come here." He marched the boy across the porch and drew a paper out of a desk. "Remember this?"

"Sir?"

"It's your workin' paper. You signed it, there's your X right there, ain't it? Answer me."

"I didn't sign that, Mr. Teece." The boy trembled. "Anyone can make an X."

"Listen to this, Silly. Contract: 'I will work for Mr. Samuel Teece two years, starting July 15, 2001, and if intending to leave will give four weeks' notice and continue working until my position is filled.' There." Teece slapped the paper, his eyes glittering. "You cause trouble, we'll take it to court."

"I can't do that," wailed the boy, tears starting to roll down his face. "If I don't go today, I don't go."

"I know just how you feel, Silly; yes, sir, I sympathize with you, boy. But we'll treat you good and give you good food, boy. Now you just get inside and start working and forget all about that nonsense, eh, Silly? Sure." Teece grinned and patted the boy's shoulder.

The boy turned and looked at the old men sitting on the porch. He could hardly see now for his tears. "Maybe—maybe one of these gentlemen here . . ." The men looked up in the hot, uneasy shadows, looking first at the boy and then at Teece.

"You meanin' to say you think a white man should take your place, boy?" asked Teece coldly.

Grandpa Quartermain took his red hands off his knees. He looked out at the horizon thoughtfully and said, "Teece, what about me?"

"What?"

"I'll take Silly's job."

The porch was silent.

Teece balanced himself in the air. "Grandpa," he said warningly. "Let the boy go. I'll clean the brass."

"Would you, would you, really?" Silly ran over to Grandpa, laughing, tears on his cheeks, unbelieving.

"Sure."

"Grandpa," said Teece, "keep your damn trap outa this."

"Give the kid a break, Teece."

Teece walked over and seized the boy's arm. "He's mine. I'm lockin' him in the back room until tonight."

"Don't, Mr. Teece!"

The boy began to sob now. His crying filled the air of the porch. His eyes were tight. Far down the street an old tin Ford was choking along, approaching, a last load of colored people in it. "Here comes my family, Mr. Teece, oh, please, please, oh God, please!"

"Teece," said one of the other men on the porch, getting up, "let him go."

Another man rose also. "That goes for me too."

"And me," said another.

"What's the use?" The men all talked now. "Cut it out, Teece."

"Let him go."

Teece felt for his gun in his pocket. He saw the men's faces. He took his hand away and left the gun in his pocket and said, "So that's how it is?"

"That's how it is," someone said.

Teece let the boy go. "All right. Get out." He jerked his hand back in the store. "But I hope you don't think you're gonna leave any trash behind to clutter my store."

"No, sir!"

"You clean everything outa your shed in back, burn it."

Silly shook his head. "I'll take it with."

“They won’t let you put it on that damn rocket.”

“I’ll take it with,” insisted the boy softly.

He rushed back through the hardware store. There were sounds of sweeping and cleaning out, and a moment later he appeared, his hands full of tops and marbles and old dusty kites and junk collected through the years. Just then the old tin Ford drove up and Silly climbed in and the door slammed.

Teece stood on the porch with a bitter smile. “What you goin’ to do up there?”

“Startin’ new,” said Silly. “Gonna have my own hardware.”

“God damn it, you been learnin’ my trade so you could run off and use it!”

“No, sir, I never thought one day this’d happen, sir, but it did. I can’t help it if I learned, Mr. Teece.”

“I suppose you got names for your rockets?”

They looked at their one clock on the dashboard of the car.

“Yes, sir.”

“Like Elijah and the Chariot, The Big Wheel and The Little Wheel, Faith, Hope, and Charity, eh?”

“We got names for the ships, Mr. Teece.”

“God the Son and the Holy Ghost, I wouldn’t wonder? Say, boy, you got one named the First Baptist Church?”

“We got to leave now, Mr. Teece.”

Teece laughed. “You got one named Swing Low, and another named Sweet Chariot?”

The car started up. “Good-bye, Mr. Teece.”

“You got one named Roll Dem Bones?”

“Good-bye, mister!”

“And another called Over Jordan! Ha! Well, tote that rocket, boy, lift that rocket, boy, go on, get blown up, see if I care!”

The car churned off into the dust. The boy rose and cupped his hands to his mouth and shouted one last time at Teece: “Mr. Teece, Mr. Teece, what you goin’ to do nights from now on? What you goin’ to do nights, Mr. Teece?”

Silence. The car faded down the road. It was gone. “What in hell did he mean?” mused Teece. “What am I goin’ to do nights?”

He watched the dust settle, and it suddenly came to him.

He remembered nights when men drove to his house, their knees sticking up sharp and their shotguns sticking up sharper, like a carful of cranes under the night trees of summer, their eyes mean.

Honking the horn and him slamming his door, a gun in his hand, laughing to himself, his heart racing like a ten-year-old’s, driving off down the summer-night road, a ring of hemp rope coiled on the car floor, fresh shell boxes making every man’s coat look bunchy.

How many nights over the years, how many nights of the wind rushing in the car, flopping their hair over their mean eyes, roaring, as they picked a tree, a good strong tree, and rapped on a shanty door!

“So that’s what the son of a bitch meant?” Teece leaped out into the sunlight. “Come back, you bastard! What am I goin’ to do nights? Why, that lousy, insolent son of a . . .”

It was a good question. He sickened and was empty. Yes, What will we do nights? he thought. Now they’re gone, what? He was absolutely empty and numb.

He pulled the pistol from his pocket, checked its load.

“What you goin’ to do, Sam?” someone asked.

“Kill that son of a bitch.”

Grandpa said, “Don’t get yourself heated.”

But Samuel Teece was gone around behind the store. A moment later he drove out the drive in his open-top car. "Anyone comin' with me?" "I'd like a drive," said Grandpa, and got up. "Anyone else?" Nobody replied.

Grandpa got in and slammed the door. Samuel Teece gutted the car out in a great whorl of dust. They didn't speak as they rushed down the road under the bright sky. The heat from the dry meadows was shimmering.

They stopped at a crossroad. "Which way'd they go, Grandpa?" Grandpa squinted. "Straight on ahead, I figure."

They went on. Under the summer trees their car made a lonely sound. The road was empty, and as they drove along they began to notice something. Teece slowed the car and bent out, his yellow eyes fierce.

"God damn it, Grandpa, you see what them bastards did?" "What?" asked Grandpa, and looked.

Where they had been carefully set down and left, in neat bundles every few feet along the empty country road, were old roller skates, a bandanna full of knicknacks, some old shoes, a cartwheel, stacks of pants and coats and ancient hats, bits of oriental crystal that had once tinkled in the wind, tin cans of pink geraniums, dishes of waxed fruit, cartons of Confederate money, washtubs, scrubboards, wash lines, soap, somebody's tricycle, someone else's hedge shears, a toy wagon, a jack-in-the-box, a stained-glass window from the Negro Baptist Church, a whole set of brake rims, inner tubes, mattresses, couches, rocking chairs, jars of cold cream, hand mirrors.

None of it flung down, no, but deposited gently and with feeling, with decorum, upon the dusty edges of the road, as if a whole city had walked here with hands full, at which time a great bronze trumpet had sounded, the articles had been relinquished to the quiet dust, and one

and all, the inhabitants of the earth had fled straight up into the blue heavens.

“Wouldn’t burn them, they said,” cried Teece angrily. “No, wouldn’t burn them like I said, but had to take them along and leave them where they could see them for the last time, on the road, all together and whole. Them niggers think they’re smart.”

He veered the car wildly, mile after mile, down the road, tumbling, smashing, breaking, scattering bundles of paper, jewel boxes, mirrors, chairs. “There, by damn, and there!”

The front tire gave a whistling cry. The car spilled crazily off the road into a ditch, flinging Teece against the glass.

“Son of a bitch!” He dusted himself off and stood out of the car, almost crying with rage.

He looked at the silent, empty road. “We’ll never catch them now, never, never.” As far as he could see there was nothing but bundles and stacks and more bundles neatly placed like little abandoned shrines in the late day, in the warm-blowing wind.

Teece and Grandpa came walking tiredly back to the hardware store an hour later. The men were still sitting there, listening, and watching the sky. Just as Teece sat down and eased his tight shoes off someone cried, “Look!”

“I’ll be damned if I will,” said Teece.

But the others looked. And they saw the golden bobbins rising in the sky, far away. Leaving flame behind, they vanished.

In the cotton fields the wind blew idly among the snow clusters. In still farther meadows the watermelons lay, unfingerprinted, striped like tortoise cats lying in the sun.

The men on the porch sat down, looked at each other, looked at the yellow rope piled neat on the store shelves, glanced at the gun shells glinting shiny brass in their cartons, saw the silver pistols and long black metal shotguns hung high and quiet in the shadows. Somebody put a straw in his mouth. Someone else drew a figure in the dust.

Finally Samuel Teece held his empty shoe up in triumph, turned it over, stared at it, and said, "Did you notice? Right up to the very last, by God, he said 'Mister'!"

The End