

# R is for Rocket, Ray Bradbury

R is for Rocket

There was this fence where we pressed our faces and felt the wind turn warm and held to the fence and forgot who we were or where we came from but dreamed of who we might be and where we might go. .

..

Yet we were boys and liked being boys and lived in a Florida town and liked the town and went to school and fairly liked the school and climbed trees and played football and liked our mothers and fathers. . .

.

But some time every hour of every day of every week for a minute or a second when we thought on fire and stars and the fence beyond which they waited . . . we liked the rockets more.

The fence. The rockets.

Every Saturday morning . . .

The guys met at my house.

With the sun hardly up, they yelled until the neighbors were moved to brandish paralysis guns out their ventilators I commanding the guys to shut up or they'd be frozen statues ifor the next hour andthenwhere would they be?

Aw, climb a rocket, stick your head in the main-jet! the kids always yelled back, but yelled this safe behind our garden I fence. Old Man Wickard, next door, is a great shot with the para-gun.

This one dim cool Saturday morning I was lying in bed thinking about how I had flunked my semantics exam the day before at formula-school, when I heard the gang yelling below. It was hardly 7 a.m. and there was still a lot of fog roaming in off the Atlantic, and only now were the weather-control vibrators at each corner starting to hum and

shoot out rays to get rid of the stuff; I heard them moaning soft and nice.

I padded to the window and stuck my head out.

"Okay, space-pirates! Motors off!"

"Hey!" shouted Ralph Priory. "We just heard, there's a new schedule today! The Moon Job, the one with the new XL3 motor, is cutting gravity in anhour!"

"Buddha, Muhammad, Allah, and other real and semi-mythological figures," I said, and went away from the window so fast the concussion laid all the boys out on my lawn.

I zippered myself into a jumper, yanked on my boots, clipped my food-capsules to my hip-pocket, for I knew there'd be no food or even thought of food today, we'd just stuff with pills when our stomachs barked, and fell down the two-story vacuum elevator.

On the lawn, all five of the guys were chewing their lips, bouncing around, scowling.

"Last one," said I, passing them at 5000 mph, "to the monorail is a bug-eyed Martian!"

On the monorail, with the cylinder hissing us along to Rocket Port, twenty miles from town — a few minutes ride — I had bugs in my stomach. A guy fifteen doesn't get to see the big stuff often enough, mostly every week it was the small continental cargo rockets coming and going on schedule. But this was big, among the biggest . . . the Moon and beyond. . . .

"I'm sick," said Priory, and hit me on the arm.

I hit him back. "Me, too. Boy, ain't Saturday the best day in the week!?"

Priory and I traded wide, understanding grins. We got along all Condition Go. The other pirates were okay. Sid Rossen, Mac Leslyn, Earl Marnee, they knew how to jump around like all the kids, and they loved the rockets, too, but I had the feeling they wouldn't be doing what

Ralph and I would do some day. Ralph and I wanted the stars for each of us, more than we would want a fistful of clear-cut blue-white diamonds.

We yelled with the yellers, we laughed with the laughers, but at the middle of it all, we were still, Ralph and I, and the cylinder whispered to a stop and we were outside yelling, laughing, running, but quiet and almost in slow motion, Ralph ahead of me, and all of us pointed one way, at the observation fence and grabbing hold, yelling for the slowpokes to catch up, but not looking back for them, and then we were all there together and the big rocket came out of its plastic work canopy like a great interstellar circus tent and moved along its gleaming track out toward the fire point, accompanied by the gigantic gantry like a gathering of prehistoric reptile birds which kept and preened and fed this one big fire monster and led it toward its seizure and birth into a suddenly blast-furnace sky.

I quit breathing. I didn't even suck another breath it seemed until the rocket was way out on the concrete meadow, followed by water-beetle tractors and great cylinders bearing hidden men, and all around, in asbestos suits, praying-mantis mechanics fiddled with machines and buzzed and cawwed and gibbered to each other on invisible, unhearable radiophones, but we could hear it all, in our heads, our minds, our hearts.

"Lord," I said at last.

"The very good Lord," said Ralph Priory at my elbow.

The others said this, too, over and over.

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. Every line was fire solidified and made perfect, it was flame frozen, and lice waiting to thaw there in the middle of a concrete prairie, ready to wake with a roar, jump high and knock its silly fine great head against the Milky Way and knock the stars down in a full return of firefall meteors. You felt it could kick the

Coal Sack Nebula square in the midriff and make it stand out of the way.

It got me in the midriff, too — it gripped me in such a way I knew the special sickness of longing and envy and grief for lack of accomplishment. And when the astronauts patrolled the field in the final silent mobile-van, my body went with them in their strange white armor, in their bubble-helmets and insouciant pride, looking as if they were team-parading to a magnetic football game at one of the local mag-fields, for mere practice. But they were going to the Moon, they went every month now, and the crowds that used to come to watch were no longer there, there was just us kids to worry them up and worry them off.

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

"Me," said Mac, "I'd give my one-year monorail privileges."

"Yeah. Oh, very much yeah."

It was a big feeling for us kids caught half between this morning's toys and this afternoon's very real and powerful fireworks.

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 hot trembling in the air, through the ground, and up our legs to our hearts. Where it had been was a blazed, seared pock and a fog of rocket smoke like a cumulus cloud banked low.

"It's gone!" yelled Priory.

And we all began to breathe fast again, frozen there on the ground as if stunned by the passing of a gigantic paralysis gun.

"I want to grow up quick," I said, then. "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.

Finally somebody, I guess it was Sidney, said:  
"Let's go to the tele-show now."

Everyone said yeah, except Priory and myself. We said no, and the other kids went off laughing breathlessly, talking, and left Priory and me there to look at the spot where the ship had been.

It spoiled everything else for us — that takeoff.  
Because of it, I flunked my semantics test on Monday.  
I didn't care.

At times like that I thanked Providence for concentrates. When your stomach is nothing but a coiled mass of excitement, you hardly feel like drawing a chair to a full hot dinner. A few concen-tabs swallowed, did wonderfully well as substitution, without the urge of appetite.

I got to thinking about it, tough and hard, all day long and late at night. It got so bad I had to use sleep-massage mechs every night, coupled with some of Tchaikovsky's quieter music to get my eyes shut.

"Good Lord, young man," said my teacher, that Monday at class. "If this keeps up I'll have you reclassified at the next psych-board meeting."  
"I'm sorry," I replied.

He looked hard at me. "What sort of block have you got? It must be a very simple, and also a conscious, one."  
I winced. "It's conscious, sir; but it's not simple. It's multi-tentacular. In brief, though — it's rockets."

He smiled. "R is for Rocket, eh?"

"I guess that's it, sir."

"We can't let it interfere with your scholastic record, though, young man."

"Do you think I need hypnotic suggestion, sir?"

"No, no." He flipped through a small tab of records with my name blocked on it. I had a funny stone in my stomach, just lying there. He looked at me. "You know, Christopher, you're king-of-the-hill here; head of the class." He closed his eyes and mused over it. "We'll have to see about a lot of other things," he concluded. Then he patted me on the shoulder.

"Well — get on with your work. Nothing to worry about."  
He walked away.

I tried to get back to work, but I couldn't. During the rest of the day the teacher kept watching me and looking at my tab-record and chewing his lip. About two in the afternoon he dialed a number on his desk-audio and discussed something with somebody for about five minutes.

I couldn't hear what was said.

But when he set the audio into its cradle, he stared straight at me with the funniest light in his eyes.

It was envy and admiration and pity all in one. It was a little sad and it was much of happiness. It had a lot in it, just in his eyes. The rest of his face said nothing.

It made me feel like a saint and a devil sitting there.

Ralph Priory and I slid home from formula-school together early that afternoon. I told Ralph what had happened and he frowned in the dark way he always frowns.

I began to worry. And between the two of us we doubled and tripled the worry.

"You don't think you'll be sent away, do you, Chris?"

Our monorail car hissed. We stopped at our station. We got out. We walked slow. "I don't know," I said.

"That would be plain dirty," said Ralph.

"Maybe I need a good psychiatric laundering, Ralph. I can't go on flubbing my studies this way."

We stopped outside my house and looked at the sky for a long moment. Ralph said something funny.

"The stars aren't out in the daytime, but we can see 'em, can't we, Chris?"

"Yeah," I said. "Darn rights."

"Well stick it together, huh, Chris? Blast them, they can't take you away now. We're pals. It wouldn't be fair."

I didn't say anything because there was no room in my throat for anything but a hexagonal lump.

"What's the matter with your eyes?" asked Priory.

"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.

While we were standing in the warm-air dryer, I did a lot of thinking. Literature, I figured, was full of people who fought battles against hard, razor-edged opponents. They pitted brain and muscle against obstacles until they won out or were themselves defeated. But here I was with hardly a sign of any outward conflict. It was all running around in spiked boots inside my head, making cuts and bruises where no one could see them except me and a psychologist. But it was just as bad.

"Ralph," I said, as we dressed, "I got a war on."

"All by yourself?" he asked.

"I can't include you," I said. "Because this is personal. How many times has my mother said, 'Don't eat so much, Chris, your eyes are bigger than your stomach?'"

"A million times."

"Twomillion. Well, paraphrase it, Ralph. Change it to 'Don'tseeso much, Chris, your mind is too big for your body.' I got a war on between a mind that wants things my body can't give it."

Priory nodded quietly. "I see what you mean about its being a personal war. In that case, Christopher, I'm at war, too."

"I knew you were," I said. "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."

We sat down in the middle of the sunlit upper deck of the house, and started checking over some homework on our formula-pads. Priory couldn't get his. Neither could I. Priory put into words the very thing I didn't dare say out loud.

"Chris, the Astronaut Boardselects. You can't apply for it. Youwait."

"I know."

"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 Astronaut helicopter will come down out of the sky, land on your lawn, and that a neat-looking engineer will ease out, walk up the rampway briskly, and touch the bell.

"You keep waiting for that helicopter until you're twenty-one. And then, on the last day of your twentieth year you drink and laugh a lot and say what the heck, you didn't really care about it, anyway."

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

"I don't want that disappointment, Chris. I'm fifteen, just like you. But if I reach my twenty-first year without an Astronaut ringing the bell where I live at the ortho-station, I — "

"I know," I said. "I know. I've talked to men who've waited, all for nothing. And if it happens that way to us, Ralph, well — we'll get good



and drunk together and then go out and take jobs loading cargo on a Europe-bound freighter."

Ralph stiffened and his face went pale. "Loading cargo."

There was a soft, quick step on the ramp and my mother was there. I smiled. "Hi, lady!"

"Hello. Hello, Ralph."

"Hello, Jhene."

She didn't look much older than twenty-five, in spite of having birthed and raised me and worked at the Government Statistics House. She was light and graceful and smiled a lot, and I could see how father must have loved her very much when he was alive. One parent is better than none. Poor Priory, now, raised in one of those orthopedical stations. . . .

Jhene walked over and put her hand on Ralph's face. "You look ill," she said. "What's wrong?"

Ralph managed a fairly good smile. "Nothing — at all."

Jhene didn't need prompting. She said, "You can stay here I tonight, Priory. We want you. Don't we, Chris?"

"Heck, yes."

"I should get back to the station," said Ralph, rather feebly, I observed.

"But since you asked and Chris here needs help on his semantics for tomorrow, I'll stick and help him."

"Very generous," I observed.

"First, though, I've a few errands. I'll take the 'rail and be back in an hour, people."

When Ralph was gone my mother looked at me intently, then brushed my hair back with a nice little move of her fingers.

"Something's happening, Chris."

My heart stopped talking because it didn't want to talk any more for a while. It waited.

I opened my mouth, but Jhene went on:

"Something's up somewhere. I had two calls at work today. One from your teacher. One from — I can't say. I don't want to say until things happen — "

My heart started talking again, slow and warm.

"Don't tell me, then, Jhene. Those calls — "

She just looked at me. She took my hand between her two soft warm ones. "You're so young, Chris. You're so awfully young."

I didn't speak.

Her eyes brightened. "You never knew your father. I wish you had. You know what he was, Chris?"

I said, "Yeah. He worked in a Chemistry Lab, deep underground most of the time."

And, my mother added, strangely, "He worked deep under the ground, Chris, and never saw the stars."

My heart yelled in my chest. Yelled loud and hard.

"Oh, Mother. Mother — "

It was the first time in years I had called her mother.

When I woke the next morning there was a lot of sunlight in the room, but the cushion where Priory slept when he stayed over, was vacant. I listened. I didn't hear him splashing in the shower-cube, and the dryer wasn't humming. He was gone.

I found his note pinned on the sliding door.

"See you at formula at noon. Your mother wanted me to do some work for her. She got a call this morning, and said she needed me to help. So long. Priory."

Priory out running errands for Jhene. Strange. A call in the early morning to Jhene. I went back and sat down on the cushion.

While I was sitting there a bunch of the kids yelled down on the lawn-court. "Hey, Chris! You're late!"

I stuck my head out the window. "Be right down!"  
"No, Chris."

My mother's voice. It was quiet and it had something funny in it. I turned around. She was standing in the doorway behind me, her face pale, drawn, full of some small pain. "No, Chris," she said again, softly. "Tell them to go on to formula without you — today."

The kids were still making noise downstairs, I guess, but I didn't hear them. I just felt myself and my mother, slim and pale and restrained in my room. Far off, the weather-control vibrators started to hum and throb.

I turned slowly and looked down at the kids. The three of them were looking up, lips parted casually, half-smiling, semantic-tabs in their knotty fingers. "Hey — " one of them said. Sidney, it was.

"Sorry, Sid. Sorry, gang. Go on without me. I can't go to formula today. See you later, huh?"

"Aw, Chris!"

"Sick?"

"No. Just — Just go on without me, gang. I'll see you."

I felt numb. I turned away from their upturned, questioning faces and glanced at the door. Mother wasn't there. She had gone downstairs,

quietly. I heard the kids moving off, not quite as boisterously, toward the monorail station.

Instead of using the vac-elevator, I walked slowly downstairs. "Jhene," I said, "where's Ralph?"

Jhene pretended to be interested in combing her long light hair with a vibro-toothed comb. "I sent him off. I didn't want him here this morning."

"Why am I staying home from formula, Jhene?"  
"Chris, please don't ask."

Before I could say anything else, there was a sound in the air. It cut through the very soundproofed wall of the house, and hummed in my marrow, quick and high as an arrow of glittering music.

I swallowed. All the fear and uncertainty and doubt went away, instantly.

When I heard that note, I thought of Ralph Priory. Oh Ralph, if you could be here now. I couldn't believe the truth of it. Hearing that note and hearing it with my whole body and soul as well as with my ears.

It came closer, that sound. I was afraid it would go away. But it didn't go away. It lowered its pitch and came down outside the house in great whirling petals of light and shadow and I knew it was a helicopter the color of the sky. It stopped humming, and in the silence my mother tensed forward, dropped the vibro-comb and took in her breath.

In that silence, too, I heard booted footsteps walking up the ramp below. Footsteps that I had waited for a long time. Footsteps I was afraid would never come.

Somebody touched the bell.  
And I knew who it was.

And all I could think was, Ralph, why in heck did you have to go away now, when all this is happening? Blast it, Ralph, why did you?

The man looked as if he had been born in his uniform. It fitted like a second layer of salt-colored skin, touched here and there with a line, a dot of blue. As simple and perfect a uniform as could be made, but with all the muscled power of the universe behind it.

His name was Trent. He spoke firmly, with a natural round perfection, directly to the subject.

I stood there, and my mother was on the far side of the room, looking like a bewildered little girl. I stood listening.

Out of all the talking I remember some of the snatches:

". . . highest grades, high IQ. Perception A-1, curiosity Triple-A.

Enthusiasm necessary to the long, eight-year educational grind. . . ."

"Yes, sir."

". . . talks with your semantics and psychology teachers — "

"Yes, sir."

". . . and don't forget, Mr. Christopher . . ."

MisterChristopher!

". . . and don't forget, Mr. Christopher, nobody is to know you have been selected by the Astronaut Board."

"No one?"

"Your mother and teacher know, naturally. But no other person must know. Is that perfectly understood?"

"Yes, sir."

Trent smiled quietly, standing there with his big hands at his sides. "You want to ask why, don't you? Why you can't tell your friends? I'll explain.

"It's a form of psychological protection. We select about ten thousand young men each year from the earth's billions. Out of that number

three thousand wind up, eight years later, as spacemen of one sort or another.

The others 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 flunk, in the first six months. And it's tough to go back and face your friends and say you couldn't make the grade at the biggest job in the world. So we make it easy to go back.

"But there's still another reason. It's psychological, too. Half the fun of being a kid is being able to lord it over the other guys, by being superior in some way. We take half the fun out of Astronaut selection by strictly forbidding you to tell your pals.

Then, we'll know if you wanted to go into space for frivolous reasons, or for space itself. If you're in it for personal conceit — you're damned. If you're in it because you can't help being in it and have to be in it — you're blessed."

He nodded to my mother. "Thank you, Mrs. Christopher."

"Sir," I said. "A question. I have a friend. Ralph Priory. He lives at an ortho-station — "

Trent nodded. "I can't tell you his rating, of course, but he's on our list. He's your buddy? You want him along, of course. I'll check his record. Station-bred, you say? That's not good. But — we'll see."

"If you would, please, thanks."

"Report to me at the Rocket Station Saturday afternoon at five, Mr. Christopher. Meantime: silence."

He saluted. He walked off. He went away in the helicopter into the sky, and Mother was beside me quickly, saying, "Oh, Chris, Chris," over and over, and we held to each other and whispered and talked and she said many things, how good this was going to be for us, but especially for me, how fine, what an honor it was, like the old old days when men fasted and took vows and joined churches and stopped up their

tongues and were silent and prayed to be worthy and to live well as monks and priests of many churches in far places, and came forth and moved in the world and lived as examples and taught well. It was no different now, this was a greater priesthood, in a way, she said, she inferred, she knew, and I was to be some small part of it, I would not be hers any more, I would belong to all the worlds, I would be all the things my father wanted to be and never lived or had a chance to be. . .

.

"Darn rights, darn rights," I murmured. "I will, I promise I will . . ."  
I caught my voice. "Jhene — how — how will we tell Ralph? What about him?"

"You're going away, that's all, Chris. Tell him that. Very simply. Tell him no more. He'll understand."

"But, Jhene, you—"

She smiled softly. "Yes, I'll be lonely, Chris. But I'll have my work and I'll have Ralph."

"You mean . . ."

"I'm taking him from the ortho-station. He'll live here, when you're gone. That's what you wanted me to say, isn't it, Chris?"

I nodded, all paralyzed and strange inside.

"That's exactly what I wanted you to say."

"He'll be a good son, Chris. Almost as good as you."

"He'll be fine!"

We told Ralph Priory. How I was going away maybe to school in Europe for a year and how Mother wanted him to come live as her son, now, until such time as I came back. We said it quick and fast, as if it burned our tongues. And when we finished, Ralph came and shook my hand and kissed my mother on the cheek and he said:

"I'll be proud. I'll be very proud."

It was funny, but Ralph didn't even ask any more about why I was going, or where, or how long I would be away. All he would say was,

"We had a lot of fun, didn't we?" and let it go at that, as if he didn't dare say any more.

It was Friday night, after a concert at the amphitheater in the center of our public circle, and Priory and Jhene and I came home, laughing, ready to go to bed.

I hadn't packed anything. Priory noted this briefly, and let it go. All of my personal supplies for the next eight years would be supplied by someone else. No need for packing.

My semantics teacher called on the audio, smiling and saying a very brief, pleasant good-bye.

Then, we went to bed, and I kept thinking in the hour before I lolled off, about how this was the last night with Jhene and Ralph. The very last night.

Only a kid of fifteen — me.

And then, in the darkness, just before I went to sleep, Priory twisted softly on his cushion, turned his solemn face to me, and whispered, "Chris?" A pause. "Chris. You still awake?" It was like a faint echo.

"Yes," I said.

"Thinking?"

A pause.

"Yes."

He said, "You're — You're notwaitingany more, are you, Chris?"

I knew what he meant. I couldn't answer.

I said, "I'm awfully tired, Ralph."

He twisted back and settled down and said, "That's what I thought.

You're notwaitingany more. Gosh, but that's good, Chris. That's good."

He reached out and punched me in the arm-muscle, lightly.

Then we both went to sleep.



It was Saturday morning. The kids were yelling outside. Their voices filled the seven o'clock fog. I heard Old Man Wickard's ventilator flip open and the zip of his para-gun, playfully touching around the kids.

"Shut up!" I heard him cry, but he didn't sound grouchy. It was a regular Saturday game with him. And I heard the kids giggle.

Priory woke up and said, "Shall I tell them, Chris, you're not going with them today?"

"Tell them nothing of the sort." Jhene moved from the door. She bent out the window, her hair all light against a ribbon of fog. "Hi, gang! Ralph and Chris will be right down. Hold gravity!"

"Jhene!" I cried.

She came over to both of us. "You're going to spend your Saturday the way you always spend it — with the gang!"

"I planned on sticking with you, Jhene."

"What sort of holiday would that be, now?"

She ran us through our breakfast, kissed us on the cheeks, and forced us out the door into the gang's arms.

"Let's not go out to the Rocket Port today, guys."

"Aw, Chris — why not?"

Their faces did a lot of changes. This was the first time in history I hadn't wanted to go. "You're kidding, Chris."

"Sure he is."

"No, he's not. He means it," said Priory. "And I don't want to go either. We go every Saturday. It gets tiresome. We can go next week instead."

"Aw . . ."

They didn't like it, but they didn't go off by themselves. It was no fun, they said, without us.

"What the heck — we'll go next week."

"Sure we will. What do you want to do, Chris?"

I told them.

We spent the morning playing Kick the Can and some games we'd given up a long time ago, and we hiked out along some old rusty and abandoned railroad tracks and walked in a small woods outside town and photographed some birds and went swimming raw, and all the time I kept thinking — this is the last day.

We did everything we had ever done before on Saturday. All the silly crazy things, and nobody knew I was going away except Ralph, and five o'clock kept getting nearer and nearer.

At four, I said good-bye to the kids.

"Leaving so soon, Chris? What about tonight?"

"Call for me at eight," I said. "We'll go see the new Sally Gibberts picture!"

"Swell."

"Cut gravity!"

And Ralph and I went home.

Mother wasn't there, but she had left part of herself, her smile and her voice and her words on a spool of audio-film on my bed. I inserted it in the viewer and threw the picture on the wall. Soft yellow hair, her white face and her quiet words:

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

That was all.

Priory waited outside while I saw it over four times. "I hate good-byes, Chris. I've gone . . . work. . . . luck. All . . . my love. . . ."

I had made a film-spool myself the night before. I spotted it in the viewer and left it there. It only said good-bye.

Priory walked halfway with me. I wouldn't let him get on the Rocket Port monorail with me. I just shook his hand, tight, and said, "It was fun today, Ralph."

"Yeah. Well, see you next Saturday, huh, Chris?"

"I wish I could say yes."

"Say yes anyway. Next Saturday — the woods, the gang, the rockets, and Old Man Wickard and his trusty para-gun."

We laughed. "Sure. Next Saturday, early. Take — Take care of our mother, will you, Priory?"

"That's a silly question, you nut," he said.

"It is, isn't it?"

He swallowed. "Chris."

"Yeah?"

"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."

I jabbed him, once, in the arm. He jabbed back.

The monorail door sealed. The car hurled itself away, and Priory was left behind.

I stepped out at the Port. It was a five-hundred-yard walk down to the Administration building. It took me ten years to walk it.

"Next time I see you you'll be a man — "

"Don't tell anybody — "

"I'll wait, Chris — "

It was all choked in my heart and it wouldn't go away and it swam around in my eyes.

I thought about my dreams. The Moon Rocket. It won't be part of me, part of my dream any longer. I'll be part of it.

I felt small there, walking, walking, walking.

The afternoon rocket to London 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 the rocket until someone snapped their heels, cracked me a quick salute.

I was numb.

"C. M. Christopher?"

"Yes, sir. Reporting, sir."

"This way, Christopher. Through that gate."

Through that gate and beyond the fence . . .

This fence where we had pressed our faces and felt the wind turn warm and held to the fence and forgot who we were or where we came from but dreamed of who we might be and where we might go . . .

This fence where had stood the boys who liked being boys who lived in a town and liked the town and fairly liked school and liked football and liked their fathers and mothers . . .

The boys who some time every hour of every day of every week thought on fire and stars and the fence beyond which they waited. . . .  
The boys who liked the rockets more.

Mother, Ralph, I'll see you. I'll be back.

Mother!

Ralph!

And, walking, I went beyond the fence.

The End