



The Earth Men, Ray Bradbury

The Earth Men

Whoever was knocking at the door didn't want to stop.

Mrs Ttt threw the door open. 'Well?'

'You speak English!' The man standing there was astounded.

'I speak what I speak,' she said.

'It's wonderful English!' The man was in uniform. There were three men with him, in a great hurry, all smiling, all dirty.

'What do you want?' demanded Mrs Ttt.

'You are a Martian!' The man smiled. 'The word is not familiar to you, certainly. It's an Earth expression.' He nodded at his men. 'We are from Earth. I'm Captain Williams. We've landed on Mars within the hour.'

Here we are, the Second Expedition! There was a First Expedition, but we don't know what happened to it. But here we are, anyway. And you are the first Martian we've met!

'Martian?' Her eyebrows went up.

'What I mean to say is, you live on the fourth planet from the sun. Correct?'

'Elementary,' she snapped, eying them.

'And we'—he pressed his chubby pink hand to his chest—'we are from Earth, Right, men?'

'Right, sir!' A chorus.

'This is the planet Tyrr,' she said, 'if you want to use the proper name.'

'Tyrr, Tyrr.' The captain laughed exhaustedly. 'What a fine name! But, my good woman, how is it you speak such perfect English?'

'I'm not speaking, I'm thinking,' she said. 'Telepathy! Good day!' And she slammed the door.

A moment later there was that dreadful man knocking again. She whipped the door open. 'What now?' she wondered.

The man was still there, trying to smile, looking bewildered. He put out his hands. 'I don't think you understand—'
'What?' she snapped.

The man gazed at her in surprise. 'We're from Earth!' 'I haven't time,' she said. 'I've a lot of cooking today and there's cleaning and sewing and all. You evidently wish to see Mr Ttt; he's upstairs in his study.'
'Yes,' said the Earth Man confusedly, blinking. 'By all means, let us see Mr Ttt.'

'He's busy.' She slammed the door again. This time the knock on the door was most impertinently loud.

'See here!' cried the man when the door was thrust open again. He jumped in as if to surprise her. 'This is no way to treat visitors!' 'All over my clean floor!' she cried. 'Mud! Get out! If you come in my house, wash your boots first.'

The man looked in dismay at his muddy boots. 'This,' he said, 'is no time for trivialities. I think,' he said, 'we should be celebrating.' He looked at her for a long time, as if looking might make her understand.

'If you've made my crystal buns fall in the oven,' she exclaimed, 'I'll hit you with a piece of wood!' She peered into a little hot oven. She came back, red, steamy-faced. Her eyes were sharp yellow, her skin was soft brown, she was thin and quick as an insect.

Her voice was metallic and sharp. 'Wait here. I'll see if I can let you have a moment with Mr Ttt. What was your business?'

The man swore luridly, as if she'd hit his hand with a hammer. 'Tell him we're from Earth and it's never been done before!'

'What hasn't?' She put her brown hand up. 'Never mind. I'll be back.'
The sound of her feet fluttered through the stone house.

Outside, the immense blue Martian sky was hot and still as warm deep sea water. The Martian desert lay broiling like a prehistoric mud pot, waves of heat rising and shimmering. There was a small rocket ship reclining upon a hilltop nearby. Large footprints came from the rocket to the door of this stone house.

Now there was a sound of quarreling voices upstairs. The men within the door stared at one another, shifting on their boots, twiddling their fingers, and holding onto their hip belts.

A man's voice shouted upstairs. The woman's voice replied. After fifteen minutes the Earth Men began walking in and out the kitchen door, with nothing to do.

'Cigarette?' said one of the men.

Somebody got out a pack and they lit up. They puffed slow streams of pale white smoke. They adjusted their uniforms, fixed their collars. The voices upstairs continued to mutter and chant. The leader of the men looked at his watch.

'Twenty-five minutes,' he said. 'I wonder what they're up to up there.'
He went to a window and looked out.

'Hot day,' said one of the men.

'Yeah,' said someone else in the slow warm time of early afternoon. The voices had faded to a murmur and were now silent. There was not a sound in the house. All the men could hear was their own breathing.

An hour of silence passed. 'I hope we didn't cause any trouble,' said the captain. He went and peered into the living room.

Mrs Ttt was there, watering some flowers that grew in the center of the room.

'I knew I had forgotten something,' she said when she saw the captain. She walked out to the kitchen. 'I'm sorry.' She handed him a slip of paper. 'Mr Ttt is much too busy.'

She turned to her cooking. 'Anyway, it's not Mr Ttt you want to see: it's Mr Aaa. Take that paper over to the next farm, by the blue canal, and Mr Aaa'll advise you about whatever it is you want to know.'

'We don't want to know anything,' objected the captain, pouting out his thick lips. 'We already know it.'

'You have the paper, what more do you want?' she asked him straight off. And she would say no more.

'Well,' said the captain, reluctant to go. He stood as if waiting for something. He looked like a child staring at an empty Christmas tree.

'Well,' he said again. 'Come on, men.'

The four men stepped out into the hot silent day.

Half an hour later, Mr Aaa, seated in his library sipping a bit of electric fire from a metal cup, heard the voices outside in the stone causeway. He leaned over the window sill and gazed at the four uniformed men who squinted up at him.

'Are you Mr Aaa?' they called.

'I am.'

'Mr Ttt sent us to see you!' shouted the captain.

'Why did he do that?' asked Mr Aaa.

'He was busy!'

'Well, that's a shame,' said Mr Aaa sarcastically. 'Does he think I have nothing else to do but entertain people he's too busy to bother with?'

'That's not the important thing, sir,' shouted the captain.

'Well, it is to me. I have much reading to do. Mr Ttt is inconsiderate. This is not the first time he has been this thoughtless of me. Stop waving your hands, sir, until I finish. And pay attention. People usually listen to me when I talk. And you'll listen courteously or I won't talk at all.'

Uneasily the four men in the court shifted and opened their mouths, and once the captain, the veins on his face bulging, showed a few little tears in his eyes.

'Now,' lectured Mr Aaa, 'do you think it fair of Mr Ttt to be so illmannered?'

The four men gazed up through the heat. The captain said, 'We're from Earth!'

'I think it very ungentlemanly of him,' brooded Mr Aaa.

'A rocket ship. We came in it. Over there!'

'Not the first time Ttt's been unreasonable, you know.'

'All the way from Earth.'

'Why, for half a mind, I'd call him up and tell him off.'

'Just the four of us; myself and these three men, my crew.'

'I'll call him up, yes, that's what I'll do!'

'Earth. Rocket. Men. Trip. Space.'

'Call him and give him a good lashing!' cried Mr Aaa. He vanished like a puppet from a stage. For a minute there were angry voices back and forth over some weird mechanism or other. Below, the captain and his crew glanced longingly back at their pretty rocket ship lying on the hillside, so sweet and lovely and fine.

Mr Aaa jerked up in the window, wildly triumphant. 'Challenged him to a duel, by the gods! A duel!'

'Mr Aaa—' the captain started all over again, quietly.

'I'll shoot him dead, do you hear!'

'Mr Aaa, I'd like to tell you. We came sixty million miles.'

Mr Aaa regarded the captain for the first time. 'Where'd you say you were from?'

The captain flashed a white smile. Aside to his men he whispered, 'Now we're getting someplace!' To Mr Aaa he called, 'We traveled sixty million miles. From Earth!'

Mr Aaa yawned. 'That's only fifty million miles this time of year.' He picked up a frightful-looking weapon. 'Well, I have to go now. Just take that silly note, though I don't know what good it'll do you, and go over that hill into the little town of Iopr and tell Mr Iii all about it.

He's the man you want to see. Not Mr Ttt, he's an idiot; I'm going to kill him. Not me, because you're not in my line of work.'

'Line of work, line of work!' bleated the captain. 'Do you have to be in a certain line of work to welcome Earth Men!'

'Don't be silly, everyone knows that!' Mr Aaa rushed downstairs. 'Goodby!' And down the causeway he raced, like a pair of wild calipers. The four travelers stood shocked. Finally the captain said, 'We'll find someone yet who'll listen to us.'

'Maybe we could go out and come in again,' said one of the men in a dreary voice. 'Maybe we should take off and land again. Give them time to organize a party.'

'That might be a good idea,' murmured the tired captain.

The little town was full of people drifting in and out of doors, saying hello to one another, wearing golden masks and blue masks and crimson masks for pleasant variety, masks with silver lips and bronze eyebrows, masks that smiled or masks that frowned, according to the owners' dispositions.

The four men, wet from their long walk, paused and asked a little girl where Mr Iii's house was.

‘There.’ The child nodded her head.

The captain got eagerly, carefully down on one knee, looking into her sweet young face. ‘Little girl, I want to talk to you.’

He seated her on his knee and folded her small brown hands neatly in his own big ones, as if ready for a bedtime story which he was shaping in his mind slowly and with a great patient happiness in details.

‘Well, here’s how it is, little girl. Six months ago another rocket came to Mars. There was a man named York in it, and his assistant. Whatever happened to them, we don’t know. Maybe they crashed. They came in a rocket. So did we. You should see it! A big rocket! So we’re the Second Expedition, following up the First. And we came all the way from Earth...’

The little girl disengaged one hand without thinking about it, and clapped an expressionless golden mask over her face. Then she pulled forth a golden spider toy and dropped it to the ground while the captain talked on.

The toy spider climbed back up to her knee obediently, while she speculated upon it coolly through the slits of her emotionless mask and the captain shook her gently and urged his story upon her.

‘We’re Earth Men,’ he said. ‘Do you believe me?’

‘Yes.’ The little girl peeped at the way she was wiggling her toes in the dust.

‘Fine.’ The captain pinched her arm, a little bit with joviality, a little bit with meanness to get her to look at him. ‘We built our own rocket ship. Do you believe that?’

The little girl dug in her nose with a finger. ‘Yes.’

‘And—take your finger out of your nose, little girl—I am the captain, and—’

'Never before in history has anybody come across space in a big rocket ship,' recited the little creature, eyes shut.

'Wonderful! How did you know?'

'Oh, telepathy.' She wiped a casual finger on her knee.

'Well, aren't you just ever so excited?' cried the captain. 'Aren't you glad?'

'You just better go see Mr Iii right away.' She dropped her toy to the ground. 'Mr Iii will like talking to you.' She ran off, with the toy spider scuttling obediently after her.

The captain squatted there looking after her with his hand out. His eyes were watery in his head. He looked at his empty hands. His mouth hung open. The other three men stood with their shadows under them. They spat on the stone street...

Mr Iii answered his door. He was on his way to a lecture, but he had a minute, if they would hurry inside and tell him what they desired...

'A little attention,' said the captain, red-eyed and tired. 'We're from Earth, we have a rocket, there are four of us, crew and captain, we're exhausted, we're hungry, we'd like a place to sleep.

We'd like someone to give us the key to the city or something like that, and we'd like somebody to shake our hands and say 'Hooray' and say 'Congratulations, old man!' That about sums it up.'

Mr Iii was a tall, vaporous, thin man with thick blind blue crystals over his yellowish eyes. He bent over his desk and brooded upon some papers, glancing now and again with extreme penetration at his guests.

'Well, I haven't the forms with me here, I don't think.' He rummaged through the desk drawers. 'Now, where did I put the forms?' He mused. 'Somewhere. Somewhere. Oh, here we are! Now!' He handed the papers over crisply. 'You'll have to sign these papers, of course.'

‘Do we have to go through all this rigmarole?’

Mr Iii gave him a thick glassy look. ‘You say you’re from Earth, don’t you? Well, then there’s nothing for it but you sign.’

The captain wrote his name. ‘Do you want my crew to sign also?’

Mr Iii looked at the captain, looked at the three others, and burst into a shout of derision. ‘Them sign! Ho! How marvelous! Them, oh, them sign!’ Tears sprang from his eyes. He slapped his knee and bent to let his laughter jerk out of his gaping mouth. He held himself up with the desk. ‘Them sign!’

The four men scowled. ‘What’s funny?’

‘Them sign!’ sighed Mr Iii, weak with hilarity. ‘So very funny. I’ll have to tell Mr Xxx about this!’ He examined the filled-out form, still laughing. ‘Everything seems to be in order.’ He nodded. ‘Even the agreement for euthanasia if final decision on such a step is necessary.’ He chuckled.

‘Agreement for what?’

‘Don’t talk. I have something for you. Here. Take this key.’

The captain flushed. ‘It’s a great honor.’

‘Not the key to the city, you fool!’ snapped Mr Iii. ‘Just a key to the House. Go down that corridor, unlock the big door, and go inside and shut the door tight. You can spend the night there. In the morning I’ll send Mr Xxx to see you.’

Dubiously the captain took the key in hand. He stood looking at the floor. His men did not move. They seemed to be emptied of all their blood and their rocket fever. They were drained dry.

‘What is it? What’s wrong?’ inquired Mr Iii. ‘What are you waiting for? What do you want?’ He came and peered up into the captain’s face, stooping. ‘Out with it, you!’

‘I don’t suppose you could even—’ suggested the captain. ‘I mean, that is, try to, or think about...’ He hesitated. ‘We’ve worked hard, we’ve

come a long way, and maybe you could just shake our hands and say 'Well done!' do you—think?' His voice faded.

Mr Iii stuck out his hand stiffly. 'Congratulations!' He smiled a cold smile. 'Congratulations.' He turned away. 'I must go now. Use that key.'

Without noticing them again, as if they had melted down through the floor, Mr Iii moved about the room packing a little manuscript case with papers. He was in the room another five minutes but never again addressed the solemn quartet that stood with heads down, their heavy legs sagging, the light dwindling from their eyes. When Mr Iii went out the door he was busy looking at his fingernails...

They straggled along the corridor in the dull, silent afternoon light. They came to a large burnished silver door, and the silver key opened it.

They entered, shut the door, and turned.

They were in a vast sunlit hall. Men and women sat at tables and stood in conversing groups. At the sound of the door they regarded the four uniformed men.

One Martian stepped forward, bowing. 'I am Mr Uuu,' he said.

'And I am Captain Jonathan Williams, of New York City, on Earth,' said the captain without emphasis.

Immediately the hall exploded!

The rafters trembled with shouts and cries. The people, rushing forward, waved and shrieked happily, knocking down tables, swarming, rollicking, seizing the four Earth Men, lifting them swiftly to their shoulders. They charged about the hall six times, six times making a full and wonderful circuit of the room, jumping, bounding, singing.

The Earth Men were so stunned that they rode the toppling shoulders for a full minute before they began to laugh and shout at each other: 'Hey! This is more like it!'

'This is the life! Boy! Yay! Yow! Whoopee!'

They winked tremendously at each other. They flung up their hands to clap the air. 'Hey!'

'Hooray!' said the crowd.

They set the Earth Men on a table. The shouting died.

The captain almost broke into tears. 'Thank you. It's good, it's good.'

'Tell us about yourselves,' suggested Mr Uuu.

The captain cleared his throat.

The audience oled and ahed as the captain talked. He introduced his crew; each made a small speech and was embarrassed by the thunderous applause.

Mr Uuu clapped the captain's shoulder. 'It's good to see another man from Earth. I am from Earth also.'

'How was that again?'

'There are many of us here from Earth.'

'You? From Earth?' The captain stared. 'But is that possible? Did you come by rocket? Has space travel been going on for centuries?' His voice was disappointed. 'What—what country are you from?'

'Tuiereol. I came by the spirit of my body, years ago.'

'Tuiereol.' The captain mouthed the word. 'I don't know that country. What's this about spirit of body?'

'And Miss Rrr over here, she's from Earth, too, aren't you, Miss Rrr?'

Miss Rrr nodded and laughed strangely.

'And so is Mr Www and Mr Qqq and Mr Vvv!'

'I'm from Jupiter,' declared one man, preening himself.

'I'm from Saturn,' said another, eyes glinting slyly.

'Jupiter, Saturn,' murmured the captain, blinking.

It was very quiet now; the people stood around and sat at the tables which were strangely empty for banquet tables. Their yellow eyes were glowing, and there were dark shadows under their cheekbones.

The captain noticed for the first time that there were no windows; the light seemed to permeate the walls. There was only one door. The captain winced. 'This is confusing. Where on Earth is this Tuiereol? Is it near America?'

'What is America?'

'You never heard of America! You say you're from Earth and yet you don't know!'

Mr Uuu drew himself up angrily. 'Earth is a place of seas and nothing but seas. There is no land. I am from Earth, and know.'

'Wait a minute.' The captain sat back. 'You look like a regular Martian. Yellow eyes. Brown skin.'

'Earth is a place of all jungle,' said Miss Rrr proudly. 'I am from Orri, on Earth, a civilization built of silver!'

Now the captain turned his head from and then to Mr Uuu and then to Mr Www and Mr Zzz and Mr Nnn and Mr Hhh and Mr Bbb. He saw their yellow eyes waxing and waning in the light, focusing and unfocusing. He began to shiver. Finally he turned to his men and regarded them somberly.

'Do you realize what this is?'

'What, sir?'

'This is no celebration,' replied the captain tiredly. 'This is no banquet. These aren't government representatives. This is no surprise party. Look at their eyes. Listen to them!'

Nobody breathed. There was only a soft white move of eyes in the close room.

'Now I understand'—the captain's voice was far away—'why everyone gave us notes and passed us on, one from the other, until we met Mr

lil, who sent us down a corridor with a key to open a door and shut a door. And here we are...'

'Where are we, sir?'

The captain exhaled. 'In an insane asylum.'

It was night. The large hall lay quiet and dimly illuminated by hidden light sources in the transparent walls. The four Earth Men sat around a wooden table, their bleak heads bent over their whispers. On the floors, men and women lay huddled.

There were little stirs in the dark corners, solitary men or women gesturing their hands. Every half-hour one of the captain's men would try the silver door and return to the table. 'Nothing doing, sir. We're locked in proper.'

'They think we're really insane, sir?'

'Quite. That's why there was no hullabaloo to welcome us. They merely tolerated what, to them, must be a constantly recurring psychotic condition.' He gestured at the dark sleeping shapes all about them.

'Paranoids, every single one! What a welcome they gave us! For a moment there'—a little fire rose and died in his eyes—'I thought we were getting our true reception. All the yelling and singing and speeches. Pretty nice, wasn't it—while it lasted?'

'How long will they keep us here, sir?'

'Until we prove we're not psychotics.'

'That should be easy.'

'I hope so.'

'You don't sound very certain, sir.'

'I'm not. Look in that corner.'

A man squatted alone in darkness. Out of his mouth issued a blue flame which turned into the round shape of a small naked woman. It flourished on the air softly in vapors of cobalt light, whispering and sighing.

The captain nodded at another corner. A woman stood there, changing. First she was embedded in a crystal pillar, then she melted into a golden statue, finally a staff of polished cedar, and back to a woman.

All through the midnight hall people were juggling thin violet flames, shifting, changing, for nighttime was the time of change and affliction. 'Magicians, sorcerers,' whispered one of the Earth Men.

'No, hallucination. They pass their insanity over into us so that we see their hallucinations too. Telepathy. Autosuggestion and telepathy.' 'Is that what worries you, sir?'

'Yes. If hallucinations can appear this "real" to us, to anyone, if hallucinations are catching and almost believable, it's no wonder they mistook us for psychotics.

If that man can produce little blue fire women and that woman there melt into a pillar, how natural if normal Martians think we produce our rocket ship with our minds.' 'Oh,' said his men in the shadows.

Around them, in the vast hall, flames leaped blue, flared, evaporated. Little demons of red sand ran between the teeth of sleeping men. Women became oily snakes. There was a smell of reptiles and animals.

In the morning everyone stood around looking fresh, happy, and normal. There were no flames or demons in the room. The captain and his men waited by the silver door, hoping it would open. Mr Xxx arrived after about four hours.

They had a suspicion that he had waited outside the door, peering in at them for at least three hours before he stepped in, beckoned, and led them to his small office.

He was a jovial, smiling man, if one could believe the mask he wore, for upon it was painted not one smile, but three. Behind it, his voice was

the voice of a not so smiling psychologist. 'What seems to be the trouble?'

'You think we're insane, and we're not,' said the captain.

'Contrarily, I do not think all of you are insane.' The psychologist pointed a little wand at the captain. 'No. Just you, sir. The others are secondary hallucinations.'

The captain slapped his knee. 'So that's it! That's why Mr Iii laughed when I suggested my men sign the papers too!'

'Yes, Mr Iii told me.' The psychologist laughed out of the carved, smiling mouth. 'A good joke. Where was I? Secondary hallucinations, yes. Women come to me with snakes crawling from their ears. When I cure them, the snakes vanish.'

'We'll be glad to be cured. Go right ahead.'

Mr Xxx seemed surprised. 'Unusual. Not many people want to be cured. The cure is drastic, you know.'

'Cure ahead! I'm confident you'll find we're all sane.'

'Let me check your papers to be sure they're in order for a "cure."' He checked a file. 'Yes. You know, such cases as yours need special "curing." The people in that hall are simpler forms.'

But once you've gone this far, I must point out, with primary, secondary, auditory, olfactory, and labial hallucinations, as well as tactile and optical fantasies, it is pretty bad business. We have to resort to euthanasia.'

The captain leaped up with a roar. 'Look here, we've stood quite enough! Test us, tap our knees, check our hearts, exercise us, ask questions!'

'You are free to speak.'

The captain raved for an hour. The psychologist listened.

'Incredible,' he mused. 'Most detailed dream fantasy I've ever heard.'
'God damn it, we'll show you the rocket ship!' screamed the captain.

'I'd like to see it. Can you manifest it in this room?'

'Oh, certainly. It's in that file of yours, under R.'

Mr Xxx peered seriously into his file. He went 'Tsk' and shut the file solemnly. 'Why did you tell me to look? The rocket isn't there.'

'Of course not, you idiot! I was joking. Does an insane man joke?'

'You find some odd senses of humor. Now, take me out to your rocket. I wish to see it.'

It was noon. The day was very hot when they reached the rocket.

'So.' The psychologist walked up to the ship and tapped it. It gonged softly. 'May I go inside?' he asked slyly.

'You may.'

Mr Xxx stepped in and was gone for a long time.

'Of all the silly, exasperating things.' The captain chewed a cigar as he waited. 'For two cents I'd go back home and tell people not to bother with Mars. What a suspicious bunch of louts.'

'I gather that a good number of their population are insane, sir. That seems to be their main reason for doubting.'

'Nevertheless, this is all so damned irritating.'

The psychologist emerged from the ship after half an hour of prowling, tapping, listening, smelling, tasting.

'Now do you believe!' shouted the captain, as if he were deaf.

The psychologist shut his eyes and scratched his nose. 'This is the most incredible example of sensual hallucination and hypnotic suggestion I've ever encountered. I went through your "rocket," as you call it.'

He tapped the hull. 'I hear it. Auditory fantasy.' He drew a breath. 'I smell it. Olfactory hallucination, induced by sensual telepathy.' He kissed the ship. 'I taste it. Labial fantasy!'

He shook the captain's hand. 'May I congratulate you? You are a psychotic genius! You have done a most complete job!

The task of projecting your psychotic image life into the mind of another via telepathy and keeping the hallucinations from becoming sensually weaker is almost impossible.

Those people in the House usually concentrate on visuals or, at the most, visuals and auditory fantasies combined. You have balanced the whole conglomeration! Your insanity is beautifully complete!

'My insanity.' The captain was pale.

'Yes, yes, what a lovely insanity. Metal, rubber, gravitizers, foods, clothing, fuel, weapons, ladders, nuts, bolts, spoons. Ten thousand separate items I checked on your vessel. Never have I seen such a complexity.

There were even shadows under the bunks and under everything! Such concentration of will! And everything, no matter how or when tested, had a smell, a solidity, a taste, a sound! Let me embrace you!

He stood back at last. 'I'll write this into my greatest monograph! I'll speak of it at the Martian Academy next month! Look at you! Why, you've even changed your eye color from yellow to blue, your skin to pink from brown.

And those clothes, and your hands having five fingers instead of six! Biological metamorphosis through psychological imbalance! And your three friends—'

He took out a little gun. 'Incurable, of course. You poor, wonderful man. You will be happier dead. Have you any last words?'

'Stop, for God's sake! Don't shoot!'

'You sad creature. I shall put you out of this misery which has driven you to imagine this rocket and these three men.

It will be most engrossing to watch your friends and your rocket vanish once I have killed you.

I will write a neat paper on the dissolvment of neurotic images from what I perceive here today.'

'I'm from Earth! My name is Jonathan Williams, and these—'

'Yes, I know,' soothed Mr Xxx, and fired his gun.

The captain fell with a bullet in his heart. The other three men screamed.

Mr Xxx stared at them. 'You continue to exist? This is superb! Hallucinations with time and spatial persistence!' He pointed the gun at them. 'Well. I'll scare you into dissolving.'

'No!' cried the three men.

'An auditory appeal, even with the patient dead,' observed Mr Xxx as he shot the three men down.

They lay on the sand, intact, not moving.

He kicked them. Then he rapped on the ship.

'It persists! They persist!' He fired his gun again and again at the bodies. Then he stood back. The smiling mask dropped from his face.

Slowly the little psychologist's face changed. His jaw sagged. The gun dropped from his fingers. His eyes were dull and vacant. He put his hands up and turned in a blind circle. He fumbled at the bodies, saliva filling his mouth.

'Hallucinations,' he mumbled frantically. 'Taste. Sight. Smell. Sound. Feeling.' He waved his hands. His eyes bulged. His mouth began to give off a faint froth.

'Go away!' he shouted at the bodies. 'Go away!' he screamed at the ship. He examined his trembling hands. 'Contaminated,' he whispered wildly. 'Carried over into me. Telepathy. Hypnosis.

Now I'm insane. Now I'm contaminated. Hallucinations in all their sensual forms.' He stopped and searched around with his numb hands for the gun. 'Only one cure. Only one way to make them go away, vanish.'

A shot rang out. Mr Xxx fell.

The four bodies lay in the sun. Mr Xxx lay where he fell.

The rocket reclined on the little sunny hill and didn't vanish.

When the town people found the rocket at sunset they wondered what it was. Nobody knew, so it was sold to a junkman and hauled off to be broken up for scrap metal.

That night it rained all night. The next day was fair and warm.

The end