

The End of the Beginning, Ray Bradbury

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He stopped the lawn mower in the middle of the yard, because he felt that the sun at just that moment had gone down and the stars come out. The fresh-cut grass that had showered his face and body died softly away.

Yes, the stars were there, faint at first, but brightening in the clear desert sky. He heard the porch screen door tap shut and felt his wife watching him as he watched the night.

‘Almost time,’ she said.

He nodded; he did not have to check his watch. In the passing moments he felt very old, then very young, very cold, then very warm, now this, now that. Suddenly he was miles away.

He was his own son talking steadily, moving briskly to cover his pounding heart and the resurgent panics as he felt himself slip into fresh uniform, check food supplies, oxygen flasks, pressure helmet, space-suiting, and turn as every man on Earth tonight turned, to gaze at the swiftly filling sky.

Then, quickly, he was back, once more the father of the son, hands gripped to the lawn-mower handle. His wife called. ‘Come sit on the porch.’

‘I’ve got to keep busy!’

She came down the steps and across the lawn. ‘Don’t worry about Robert; he’ll be all right.’

‘But it’s all so new,’ he heard himself say. ‘It’s never been done before. Think of it—a manned rocket going up tonight to build the first space station. Good Lord, it can’t be done, it doesn’t exist, there’s no rocket,

no proving ground, no take-off time, no technicians. For that matter. I don't even have a son named Bob. The whole thing's too much for me!

'Then what are you doing out here, staring?'

He shook his head. 'Well, late this morning, walking to the office, I heard someone laugh out loud. It shocked me, so I froze in the middle of the street. It was me, laughing! Why? Because finally I really knew what Bob was going to do tonight; at last I believed it.

"Holy" is a word I never use, but that's how I felt stranded in all that traffic. Then, middle of the afternoon, I caught myself humming. You know the song. "A wheel in a wheel. Way in the middle of the air." I laughed again. The space station, of course, I thought.

The big wheel with hollow spokes where Bob'll live six or eight months, then get along to the Moon. Walking home, I remembered more of the song. "Little wheel run by faith, big wheel run by the grace of God." I wanted to jump, yell, and flame-out myself!

His wife touched his arm. 'If we stay out here, let's at least be comfortable.'

They placed two wicker rockers in the center of the lawn and sat quietly as the stars dissolved out of darkness in pale crushings of rock salt strewn from horizon to horizon.

'Why,' said his wife, at last, 'it's like waiting for the fireworks at Sisley Field every year.'

'Bigger crowd tonight...'

'I keep thinking—a billion people watching the sky right now, their mouths all open at the same time.'

They waited, feeling the earth move under their chairs.

'What time is it now?'

'Eleven minutes to eight.'

'You're always right; there must be a clock in your head.'

'I can't be wrong, tonight. I'll be able to tell you one second before they blast off. Look! The ten-minute warning!'

On the western sky they saw four crimson flares open out, float shimmering down the wind above the desert, then sink silently to the extinguishing earth.

In the new darkness the husband and wife did not rock in their chairs.

After a while he said, 'Eight minutes.' A pause. 'Seven minutes.' What seemed a much longer pause. 'Six...'

His wife, her head back, studied the stars immediately above her and murmured, 'Why?' She closed her eyes. 'Why the rockets, why tonight? Why all this? I'd like to know.'

He examined her face, pale in the vast powdering light of the Milky Way. He felt the stirring of an answer, but let his wife continue.

'I mean it's not that old thing again, is it, when people asked why men climbed Mt Everest and they said, "Because it's there"? I never understood. That was no answer to me.'

Five minutes, he thought. Time ticking...his wristwatch...a wheel in a wheel...little wheel run by...big wheel run by...way in the middle of...four minutes!...The men snug in the rocket by now, the hive, the control board flickering with light...

His lips moved.

'All I know is it's really the end of the beginning. The Stone Age, Bronze Age, Iron Age; from now on we'll lump all those together under one big name for when we walked on Earth and heard the birds at morning and cried with envy. Maybe we'll call it the Earth Age, or maybe the Age of Gravity.'

Millions of years we fought gravity. When we were amoebas and fish we struggled to get out of the sea without gravity crushing us.

Once safe on the shore we fought to stand upright without gravity breaking our new invention, the spine, tried to walk without stumbling, run without falling. A billion years Gravity kept us home, mocked us with wind and clouds, cabbage moths and locusts. That's what's so God-awful big about tonight...it's the end of old man Gravity and the age we'll remember him by, for once and all.

I don't know where they'll divide the ages, at the Persians, who dreamt of flying carpets, or the Chinese, who all unknowing celebrated birthdays and New Years with strung ladyfingers and high skyrockets, or some minute, some incredible second in the next hour. But we're in at the end of a billion years trying, the end of something long and to us humans, anyway, honorable.'

Three minutes...two minutes fifty-nine seconds...two minutes fiftyeight seconds...

'But,' said his wife, 'I still don't know why.'

Two minutes, he thought. Ready? Ready? Ready? The far radio voice calling. Ready! Ready! Ready! The quick, faint replies from the humming rocket. Check! Check! Check!

Tonight, he thought, even if we fail with this first, we'll send a second and a third ship and move on out to all the planets and later, all the stars. We'll just keep going until the big words like 'immortal' and 'forever' take on meaning.

Big words, yes, that's what we want. Continuity. Since our tongues first moved in our mouths we've asked, What does it all mean? No other question made sense, with death breathing down our necks.

But just let us settle in on ten thousand worlds spinning around ten thousand alien suns and the question will fade away. Man will be endless and infinite, even as space is endless and infinite. Man will go on, as space goes on, forever.

Individuals will die as always, but our history will reach as far as we'll ever need to see into the future, and with the knowledge of our survival for all time to come, we'll know security and thus the answer we've always searched for. Gifted with life, the least we can do is preserve and pass on the gift to infinity. That's a goal worth shooting for.

The wicker chairs whispered ever so softly on the grass.

One minute.

'One minute,' he said aloud.

'Oh!' His wife moved suddenly to seize his hands. 'I hope that Bob...'

'He'll be all right!'

'Oh, God, take care...'

Thirty seconds.

'Watch now.'

Fifteen, ten, five...

'Watch!'

Four, three, two, one.

'There! There! Oh, there, there!'

They both cried out. They both stood. The chairs toppled back, fell flat on the lawn. The man and his wife swayed, their hands struggled to find each other, grip, hold.

They saw the brightening color in the sky and, ten seconds later, the great uprising comet burn the air, put out the stars, and rush away in fire flight to become another star in the returning profusion of the Milky Way. The man and wife held each other as if they had stumbled on the rim of an incredible cliff that faced an abyss so deep and dark there seemed no end to it.

Staring up, they heard themselves sobbing and crying. Only after a long time were they able to speak.

'It got away, it did, didn't it?'

'Yes...'

'It's all right, isn't it?'

'Yes...yes...'

'It didn't fall back...?'

'No, no, it's all right. Bob's all right, it's all right.'

They stood away from each other at last.

He touched his face with his hand and looked at his wet fingers. 'I'll be damned,' he said. 'I'll be damned.'

They waited another five and then ten minutes until the darkness in their heads, the retina, ached with a million specks of fiery salt. Then they had to close their eyes.

'Well,' she said, 'now let's go in.'

He could not move. Only his hand reached a long way out by itself to find the lawn-mower handle. He saw what his hand had done and said.

'There's just a little more to do...'

'But you can't see.'

'Well enough,' he said. 'I must finish this. Then we'll sit on the porch awhile before we turn in.'

He helped her put the chairs on the porch and sat her down and then walked back out to put his hands on the guide bar of the lawn mower. The lawn mower. A wheel in a wheel.

A simple machine which you held in your hands, which you sent on ahead with a rush and a clatter while you walked behind with your quiet philosophy. Racket, followed by warm silence.

Whirling wheel, then soft footfall of thought.

I'm a billion years old, he told himself; I'm one minute old. I'm one inch, no, ten thousand miles, tall. I look down and can't see my feet they're so far off and gone away below.

He moved the lawn mower. The grass showering up fell softly around him; he relished and savored it and felt that he was all mankind bathing at last in the fresh waters of the fountain of youth.

Thus bathed, he remembered the song again about the wheels and the faith and the grace of God being way up there in the middle of the sky where that single star, among a million motionless stars, dared to move and keep on moving.

Then he finished cutting the grass.

The end