

Dark They were, and Golden-Eyed

(Ray Bradbury)

The rocket metal cooled in the meadow winds. Its lid gave a bulging pop. From its clock interior stepped a man, a woman, and three children. The other passengers whirled away across the Martian meadow, leaving the man alone among his family.

The man felt his hair flutter and the tissues of his body draw tight as if he were standing at the center of a vacuum. His wife, before him, seemed almost to whirl away in smoke. The children, small seeds, might at any instant be sown to all the Martian climes.

The children looked up at him, as people look to the sun to tell what time of their life it is. His face was cold.

"What's wrong?" asked his wife.

"Let's get back on the rocket."

"Go back to the Earth?"

"Yes! Listen!"

The wind blew as if to flake away their identities. At any moment the Martian air might draw his soul from him, as marrow comes from a white bone. He felt submerged in a chemical that could dissolve his intellect and burn away his past.

They looked at the Martian hills that time had worn with a crushing pressure of years. They saw the old cities, lost in their meadows, lying like children's delicate bones among the blowing lakes of grass.

"Chin up, Harry," said his wife. "It's too late. We've come over sixty million miles."

The children with their yellow hair hollered at the deep dome of the Martian sky. There was no answer but the racing hiss of wind through the stiff grass.

He picked up the luggage in his cold hands. "Here we go," he said – a man standing on the edge of a sea, ready to wade in and be drowned.

They walked into town.

Their names were Bittering – Harry and his wife Cora, Dan, Laura, and David. They built a small white cottage and ate good breakfasts there, but the fear was never gone. It lay with Mr. and Mrs. Bittering, a third unbidden partner at every midnight talk, at every dawn awakening.

"I feel like a salt crystal," he said, "in a mountain stream, being washed away. We don't belong here. We're Earth people. This is Mars. It was meant for the Martians. For heaven's sake, Cora, let's buy tickets for home!"

But she only shook her head. "One day the atom bomb will fix the Earth. Then we'll be safe here."

"Safe and insane!"

"Nonsense!" Mr. Bittering looked out of the windows. "We're clean, decent people." He looked at his children. "All dead cities have some kind of ghosts in them. Memories, I mean." He stared at the hills. "You see a staircase and you wonder what the Martians looked like climbing it. You see the Martian paintings and you wonder what the painter was like. You make a little ghost in your mind, a memory. It's quite natural. Imagination." He stopped. "You haven't been prowling up in those ruins, have you?"

"No, Papa," David looked at his shoes.

"See that you stay away from them. Pass the jam."

"Just the same," said little David, "I bet something happens."

Something happened that afternoon.

Laura stumbled through the settlement, crying. She dashed blindly onto the porch.

"Mother, Father – the war, Earth!" she sobbed. "A radio flash just came. Atom bombs hit New York! All the space rockets have blown up. No more rockets to Mars, ever!"

"Oh, Harry!" The mother held onto her husband and daughter.

"Are you sure, Laura?" asked the father quietly.

Laura wept. "We're stranded on Mars, forever and ever!"

For a long time there was only the sound of the wind in the late afternoon. Alone, thought Bittering. Only a thousand of us here. No way back. No way. No way. Sweat poured out from his face and his hands and his body; he was drenched in the hotness of his fear. He wanted to strike Laura, cried, "No, you're lying! The rockets will come back!" Instead, he stroked Laura's head against him and said, "The rockets will get through someday."

"Father, what will we do?"

"Go about our business, of course. Raise crops and children. Wait, keep things going until the war ends and the rockets come again."

The two boys stepped out onto the porch.

"Children," he said, sitting there, looking beyond them, "I've something to tell you."

"We know," they said.

He looked with dismay at their house. "Even the house. The wind's done something to it. The air's burned it. The fog at night. The boards, all warped out of shape. It's not an Earthman's house any more."

"Oh, your imagination!"

He put on his coat and tie. "I'm going into town. We've got to do something now. I'll be back."

"Wait, Harry!" his wife cried.

But he was gone.

In town on the shadowy step of the grocery store, the men sat with their hands on

their knees, conversing with great leisure and ease.

Mr. Bittering wanted to fire a pistol in the air.

What are you doing, you fools! he thought. Sitting here! You've heard the news – we're stranded on this planet. Well, move! Aren't you frightened? Aren't you afraid? What are you going to do?

"Hello, Harry," said everyone.

"Look," he said to them. "You did hear the news, the other day, didn't you?"

They nodded and laughed. 'Sure. Sure, Harry.'

"What are you going to do about it?"

"Do, Harry, do? What can we do?"

"Build a rocket, that's what!"

"A rocket, Harry? To go back to all that trouble? Oh, Harry!"

"But you must want to go back. Have you noticed the peach blossoms, the onions and the grass?"

"Why, yes, Harry, seems we did," said one of the men.

"Doesn't it scare you?"

"Can't recall that it did much, Harry."

"Idiots!"

"Now, Harry."

Bittering wanted to cry, "You've got to work with me. If we stay here, we'll all change. The air. Don't you smell it? Something in the air. A Martian virus, may be; some seed, or a pollen. Listen to me!"

They stared at him.

"Sam," he said to one of them.

"Yes, Harry?"

"Will you help me build a rocket?"

"Harry, I got a whole load of metal and some blueprints. You want to work in my metal shop on a rocket you're welcome. I'll sell you that metal for five hundred dollars. You should be able to construct a right pretty rocket, if you work alone, in about thirty years."

Everyone laughed.

"Don't laugh."

Sam looked at him with quite good humor.

"Sam," Bittering said, "Your eyes –"

"What about them, Harry?"

"Didn't they use to be grey?"

"Well, now, I don't remember."

"They were, weren't they?"

"Why do you ask, Harry?"

"Because now they're kind of yellow-colored."

"Is that so, Harry?" Sam said, casually.

"And you're taller and thinner—"

"You might be right, Harry."

'Sam, you shouldn't have yellow eyes."

"Harry, what color of eyes have you got?" Sam said.

"My eyes? They're blue, of course."

"Here you are, Harry." Sam handed him a pocket mirror. "Take a look at yourself."

Mr. Bittering hesitated, and then raised the mirror to his face.

There were little, very dim flecks of new gold captured in the blue of his eyes.

"Now look what you've done," said Sam a moment later. "You've broken my mirror."

Harry Bittering moved into the metal shop and began to build the rocket. Men stood in the open door and talked and joked without raising their voices. Once in a while they gave him a hand on lifting something. But mostly they just idled and watched him with their yellowing eyes.

"It's supper time, Harry," they said.

His wife appeared with his supper in a wicker basket.

"I won't touch it," he said. "I'll eat only food from our deep-freeze. Food that came from the Earth. Nothing from our garden."

His wife stood watching him. "You can't build a rocket."

"I worked in a shop once, when I was twenty. I know metal. Once I get it started, the others will help," he said, not looking at her, laying out the blueprints.

"Harry, Harry," she said, helplessly.

"We've got to get away, Cora. We've got to!"

Summer burned the canals dry. Summer moved like flame upon the meadows. In the empty Earth settlement, the painted houses flaked and peeled. Rubber tires upon which children had swung in back yards hung suspended like stopped clock pendulums in the blazing air.

At the metal shop, the rocket frame began to rust.

In the quiet autumn Mr. Bittering stood, very dark now, very golden-eyed, upon the slope above his villa, looking at the valley.

"It's time to go back," said Cora.

"Yes, but we're not going," he said quietly. "There's nothing any more."

"Your books," she said. "Your fine clothes."

"The town's empty. No one's going back," he said. "There's no reason to, none at all."

The daughter wove tapestries and the sons played songs on the ancient flutes and pipes, their laughter echoing in the marble villa.

Mr. Bittering gazed at the Earth settlement far away in the low valley. "Such odd, such ridiculous houses the Earth people built."

"They didn't know any better," his wife mused. "Such ugly people. I'm glad they've gone."

They both looked at each other, startled by all they had just finished saying. They laughed.

"Where did they go?" he wondered. He glanced at his wife. She was golden and slender like his daughter. She looked at him, and he seemed almost as young as their eldest son.

"I don't know," she said.

"We'll go back to town may be next year, or the year after, or the year after that," he said, calmly. "Now – I'm warm. How about taking a swim?"

They turned their backs to the valley. Arm in arm they walked silently down a path of clear-running spring water.

Five years later a rocket fell out of the sky. It lay steaming in the valley. Men leaped out of it, shouting.

"We have won the war on the Earth! We're here to rescue you! Hey!"

But the American-built town of cottages, peach trees, and theaters was silent. They found a flimsy rocket frame rusting in an empty shop.

The rocket men searched the hills. The captain established headquarters in an abandoned bar. His lieutenant came back to report.

"The town's empty, but we found the native life in the hills, sir. Dark people. Yellow eyes. The Martians. Very friendly. We talked a bit, not much. They learn English fast. I'm sure our relations will be most friendly with them, sir."

"Dark, eh?" mused the captain. "How many?"

"Six, eight hundred, I'd say, living in those marble ruins in the hills, sir. Tall, healthy. Beautiful women."

"Did they tell you what became of the men and women who built this Earth settlement, Lieutenant?"

"They hadn't the foggiest notion of what happened to this town or its people."

"Strange. You think those Martians killed them?"

"They look surprisingly peaceful. Chances are a plague did this town in, sir."

"Perhaps. I suppose this is one of those mysteries we'll never solve. One of those mysteries you read about."

Theme

The Bittering family are emigrants who join the other Earth people to escape from nuclear war on the planet Earth; they flee to the planet Mars in a space rocket. When they arrive, they find that all the Martian towns are deserted, empty and quiet. There are, however, ghosts – or memories – that still remain in the dead cities. And there is something that brings changes in the Earth people who have come to live there. Harry Bittering is determined to cling to his Earth ways, to make an Earth life for himself and his family on Mars, to work and wait until he can return to his Earth home. But, gradually, he realizes that they, too, are beginning to change in strange ways, to lose their Earthliness

Reading Notes

bulging pop	irregular short, sharp, explosive sound
whirl away	move or travel rapidly
flake away their identities	losing the knowledge of who they were, lose their identities
marrow	soft, fatty substance that fills the hollow parts of bones
chin up, Harry	be brave; don't be afraid, Harry
holler	(colloquial) yell and shout
the atom bomb will fix the earth	the bomb will permanently destroy the Earth
prowling up	going about
stumble	strike the foot against something and almost fall
stranded	in a difficult position
drenched	made wet all over
the Martian virus	a microbe or disease germ found on Mars
flecks	small spots or patches
tapestries	decorations, embroideries
leaped out of it	jumped out of it

EXERCISES

1. Choose the correct answer.
 - i. The man felt his hair flutter and the tissues of his body draw tight as if he were
 - a) sick.
 - b) happy.
 - c) feeling sad.
 - d) standing at the center of a vacuum.
 - ii. At any moment the Martian air might
 - a) bring relief.
 - b) draw his soul from him.
 - c) kill him.
 - d) become pleasant.

- iii. What did they see on the Martian hills?
 a) the old cities b) flower beds
 c) stream of fresh water d) a deep valley
- iv. What did they do after building a cottage?
 a) decorated it b) furnished it
 c) ate good breakfasts d) arranged a feast
- v. What was the news Laura told to her parents?
 a) the war on the Earth b) the death of the people
 c) the arrival of a rocket d) the fall of a rocket
- vi. Which one of the cities was attacked?
 a) Texas b) Virginia
 c) New York d) New Jersey
- vii. What did they feel on Mars after the attack on the Earth?
 a) drenched b) stranded
 c) secluded d) surrendered
- viii. What were the men doing in town on the shadowy step of the grocery store?
 a) quarrelling b) conversing with great leisure and ease
 c) playing d) buying the grocery
- ix. How many dollars did he demand to sell the metal?
 a) two hundred b) three hundred
 c) four hundred d) five hundred
- x. In which season did Mr. Bittering stand very golden-eyed?
 a) winter b) summer
 c) autumn d) spring

2. Some of the statements below are true and some are false. Mark the statements true or false.

- i. The rocket metal burned in the meadow winds.
- ii. He felt submerged in a chemical that could enhance his intellect.
- iii. He felt like a salt crystal in a mountain stream.
- iv. All the space rockets flew up.
- v. He was drenched in the hotness of his fear.
- vi. Harry suggested to build a rocket.
- vii. Men helped Harry in building a rocket.
- viii. The daughter wove tapestries.
- ix. Harry seemed almost as young as his eldest son.
- x. Six years later a rocket fell out of the sky.

3. Answer the following questions.

- i. Why did Harry want to go back to the Earth?
- ii. Why did he want to stay?
- iii. What climate did they face?
- iv. What was the condition of the Bittering family on hearing the news of the war on the Earth?
- v. What did they want to grow?
- vi. What was the condition of their house?
- vii. What was the advice Harry gave to the people?
- viii. How dangerous can a Martian virus be?

4. Write the answers to the following questions in 100-150 words.

- i. What circumstance did the Bittering family face?
- ii. How social were the people of Mars?
- iii. How did the life change finally? Was this better or worse?
- iv. Write the story in your own words.
- v. What differences can you point out in the life style of the people of two different planets?

5. Use the correct forms of the verbs given in brackets.

- i. The man (feel) his hair flutter.
- ii. They (see) the old cities.
- iii. They (look) at their children.
- iv. Laura (stumble) through the settlement.
- v. He (drench) in the hotness of his fear.
- vi. All the boards (warp) out of shape.
- vii. Harry (move) into the metal shop.
- viii. His wife (appear) with his supper in a wicker basket.
- ix. The sons (play) songs on the ancient flutes.
- x. They (turn) their backs to the valley.

6. Punctuate the following lines.

the towns empty but we found native life in the hills sir dark people yellow eyes the martians very friendly we talked a bit not much they learn english fast