

TAKE ME HOME

By Ray Bradbury

When I was seven or eight years old, I began to read the science-fiction magazines that were brought by guests into my grandparents' boarding house, in Waukegan, Illinois. Those were the years when Hugo Gernsback was publishing *Amazing Stories*, with vivid, appallingly imaginative cover paintings that fed my hungry imagination. Soon after, the creative beast in me grew when Buck Rogers appeared, in 1928, and I think I went a trifle mad that autumn. It's the only way to describe the intensity with which I devoured the stories. You rarely have such fevers later in life that fill your entire day with emotion.

When I look back now, I realize what a trial I must have been to my friends and relatives. It was one frenzy after one elation after one enthusiasm after one hysteria after another. I was always yelling and running somewhere, because I was afraid life was going to be over that very afternoon.

My next madness happened in 1931, when Harold Foster's first series of Sunday color panels based on Edgar Rice Burroughs's "Tarzan" appeared, and I simultaneously discovered, next door at my uncle Bion's house, the "John Carter of Mars" books. I know that "The Martian Chronicles" would never have happened if Burroughs hadn't had an impact on my life at that time.

I memorized all of "John Carter" and "Tarzan," and sat on my grandparents' front lawn repeating the stories to anyone who would sit and listen. I would go out to that lawn on summer nights and reach up to the red light of Mars and say, "Take me home!" I yearned to fly away and land there in the strange dusts that blew over dead-sea bottoms toward the ancient cities.

While I remained earthbound, I would time-travel, listening to the grownups, who on warm nights gathered outside on the lawns and porches to talk and reminisce. At the end of the Fourth of July, after the uncles had their cigars and philosophical discussions, and the aunts, nephews, and cousins had their ice-cream cones or lemonade, and we'd exhausted all the fireworks, it was the special time, the sad time, the time of beauty. It was the time of the fire balloons.

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Even at that age, I was beginning to perceive the endings of things, like this lovely paper light. I had already lost my grandfather, who went away for good when I was five. I remember him so well: the two of us on the lawn in front of the porch, with twenty relatives for an audience, and the paper balloon held between us for a final moment, filled with warm exhalations, ready to go.

I'd helped my grandpa carry the box in which lay, like a gossamer spirit, the paper-tissue ghost of a fire balloon waiting to be breathed into, filled, and set adrift toward the midnight sky. My grandfather was the high priest and I his altar boy. I helped take the red-white-and-blue tissue out of the box and watched as Grandpa lit a little cup of dry straw that hung beneath it. Once the fire got going, the balloon whispered itself fat with the hot air rising inside.

But I could not let it go. It was so beautiful, with the light and shadows dancing inside. Only when Grandpa gave me a look, and a gentle nod of his head, did I at last let the balloon drift free, up past the porch, illuminating the faces of my family. It floated up

above the apple trees, over the beginning-to-sleep town, and across the night among the stars.

We stood watching it for at least ten minutes, until we could no longer see it. By then, tears were streaming down my face, and Grandpa, not looking at me, would at last clear his throat and shuffle his feet. The relatives would begin to go into the house or around the lawn to their houses, leaving me to brush the tears away with fingers sulfured by the firecrackers. Late that night, I dreamed the fire balloon came back and drifted by my window.

Twenty-five years later, I wrote “The Fire Balloons,” a story in which a number of priests fly off to Mars looking for creatures of good will. It is my tribute to those summers when my grandfather was alive. One of the priests was like my grandpa, whom I put on Mars to see the lovely balloons again, but this time they were Martians, all fired and bright, adrift above a dead sea. ♦

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