

A Short Story

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RAY BRADBURY

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SQUARE PEGS

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TINY WINDOWS

Cover: Illustration created by MidJourney AI software using the prompt “a meteor field where each meteor is an uniquely different world, multiverse, parallel universe, cosmos, in the style of Ian Miller.”

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Lisabeth stopped screaming because she was tired. Also, there was this room to consider. There was a vast vibration, like being plunged about in the loud interior of a bell. The room was filled with sighs and murmurs of travel. She was in a rocket. Suddenly she recalled the explosion, the plummeting, the Moon riding by in cool space, the Earth gone. Lisabeth turned to a round window deep and blue as a mountain well. It was filled to its brim with evil swift life, movement, vast space monsters lurking with fiery arms, hurrying to some unscheduled destruction. A meteor school flashed by, blinking insane dot-dash codes. She put her hand out after them.

Then she heard the voices. Sighing, whispering voices.

Quietly, she moved to an iron barred door and peered without a sound through the little window of the locked frame.

"Lisabeth's stopped screaming," a tired woman's voice said. It was Helen.

"Thank heaven," a man's voice sighed. "I'll be raving myself before we reach Asteroid Thirty-six."

A second woman's voice said, irritably, "Are you sure this will work? Is it the *best* thing for Lisabeth?"

"She'll be better off than she was on Earth," cried the man.

"We might have asked her if she wanted to *take* this trip, at least, John."

John swore. "You can't ask an insane sister what she wants!"

"Insane? Don't use that word!"

"Insane she is," John said, bluntly. "For honesty's sake, call a spade a spade. There was no question of asking her to come on this trip. We simply had to *make* her do it, that's all."

Listening to them talk, Lisabeth's white fingers trembled on the caged room wall. They were like voices from some warm dream, far away, on a telephone, talking in another language.

"The sooner we get her there and settled on Asteroid Thirty-six, the sooner I can get back to New York," the man was saying in this

incomprehensible telephone talk she was eavesdropping on. "After all, when you have a woman thinking she's Catherine the Great—"

"I am, I am, I am!" screamed Lisabeth out of her window into their midst. "I am Catherine!" It was as if she had shot a lightning bolt into the room. The three people almost flew apart. Now Lisabeth raved and cried and clung drunkenly to the cell bars and shouted out her belief in herself. "I am, oh, I am!" she sobbed.

"Good heavens," said Alice.

"Oh, Lisabeth!"

The man, with a look of startled concern, came to the window and looked in with the false understanding of a person looking down upon a wounded rabbit. "Lisabeth, we're sorry. We understand. You *are* Catherine, Lisabeth."

"Then call me Catherine!" screamed the wild thing in the room.

"Of course, Catherine," insisted the man, swiftly. "Catherine, your Highness, we await your commands."

This only made the pale thing writhing against the door the wilder. "You don't believe, you don't really believe. I can tell by your awful faces, I can tell by your eyes and your mouths. Oh, you don't really believe. I want to kill you!" She blazed her hatred out at them so the man fell away from the door. "You're lying, and I know it's a lie. But I *am* Catherine and you'll never in all your years understand!"

"No," said the man, turning. He went and sat down and put his hands to his face. "I guess we don't understand."

"Good grief," said Alice.

Lisabeth slipped to the red velvet floor and lay there, sobbing away her great unhappiness. The room moved on in space, the voices outside the room murmured and argued and talked on and on through the next half hour.

They placed a food tray inside her door an hour later. It was a simple tray with simple bowls of cereal and milk and hot buns on it. Lisabeth did not move from where she lay. There was one regal thing in the room—this red velvet on which she sprawled in silent rebellion. She would not eat

their nasty food for it was most probably poisoned. And it did not come in monogrammed dishes with monogrammed napkins on a regally monogrammed tray for Catherine, Empress of All The Russias! Therefore she would not eat.

"Catherine! Eat your food, Catherine."

Lisabeth said nothing. They could go on insisting. She wanted only to die now. Nobody understood. There was an evil plan to oust her from her throne. These dark, wicked people were part of the plan.

The voices murmured again.

"I have important business in New York, too, just as important as yours, Alice," said the man. "The Amusement Park for one; those rides have to be installed next week, and the gambling equipment I bought in Reno, that has to be shipped East by next Saturday. If I'm not there to do it, who'll attend to the job?"

Murmur, murmur, dream soft, listen, far away voices.

Alice said, "Here it is autumn and the big fashion show tomorrow and here I am going off in space to some ridiculous planet for heaven knows what reason. I don't see why one of us couldn't have committed her."

"We're her brother and sisters, that's why," the man snapped.

"Well, now that we're talking about it, I don't understand it all. About Lisabeth and where we're taking her. What *is* this Asteroid Thirty-Six?"

"A civilization."

"It's an insane asylum, I thought."

"Nonsense, it's not." He struck a cigarette into fire, puffing. "We discovered, a century ago, that the asteroids were inhabited, inside. They're really a series of small planets, inside of which people breathe and walk around."

"And they'll cure Lisabeth?"

"No, they won't cure her at all."

"Then, why are we taking her there?" Helen was mixing a drink with a brisk shaking of her hands, the ice rattling in the container. She poured and drank. "Why?"

"Because she will be happy there, because it will be the environment for her."

"Won't she ever come back to Earth?"

"Never."

"But how silly. I thought she'd be cured and come home."

He crushed out one cigarette, snapped another into light, smoked it hungrily, lines under his eyes, his hands trembling.

"Don't ask questions. I've got some radioing to do back to New York." He walked across the cabin and fussed with some equipment. There was a buzzing and a bell sound. He shouted, "Hello, New York! Hang it. Get me through to Sam Norman on Eighth Avenue, Apartment C." He waited. Finally, "Hello, Sam. My, but that was a slow connection. Look, Sam, about that equipment—*What* equipment? The gambling equipment, where's your brain!"

"While you have the contact through to Earth—" said Helen.

"What? Sam—What?" He turned to glare at Helen.

"While you've the contact through," said Helen, holding his elbow urgently, "let me call my beauty operator, I want an appointment for Monday. My hair's a mess."

"I'm trying to talk to Sam Norman," John objected. To Sam he said, "What did you say?" To Helen: "Go away."

"But I want to talk—"

"You can when I'm finished!" He talked with Sam for five minutes, very loud, and then hung up.

"Oh." Helen gasped.

"I'm sorry," he said, tiredly. "Call Earth back yourself and get your fool hair-dresser." He lighted another cigarette while she dialed and called into the speaker.

He looked at Alice who was emptying her fourth cocktail glass. "Alice, you know, Lisabeth's not really insane."

Helen, who was calling Earth, said, "*Shh!*" then turned to her brother blankly. "Not insane?" To the space phone: "Hold on a minute, there." To her brother: "What do you mean, not insane?"

"It's relative. She is insane to us. She wants to be Catherine of Russia. That's illogical, to us. To her it is logical in the extreme. We are now taking her to a planet where it will be logic itself."

He got up, walked to the door and looked in at the lovely pale recumbent Catherine the Great. He put his hand to the bars, the cigarette trembling out nervous smoke. He spoke quietly:

"Some times, I envy her. I'll envy her even more every hour. She'll stay and be happy. And we? We'll go back, back to New York, back to big roulettes and big dice." He looked at Helen. "Back to hairdressers and men." He looked at Alice, "Back to cocktails and straight gin."

"I don't like insults," cried Alice.

"I wasn't insulting anybody," he replied.

"Just a moment!" said Helen. "New York?"

John sat wearily down. "Anyway, it's all relative. These asteroids are amazing places; all kinds of cultures. You *know* that."

Lisabeth leaned against the cell door which swayed ever so quietly outward. It was unlocked. Her gaze dropped to the catch and her eyes widened. Escape. These talking fools, who didn't understand, were trying to kill her. She might run out of the cell quickly, across the room and into the other little room, where there were all kinds of weird mechanisms. If she managed to reach that room, she could smash and tangle wires and boxes with her hands!

"I don't even know what insanity is," said Alice, far away.

"It's a rebellion. Against the mores or ethical setup in a society. That's what it is," said the man.

Lisabeth opened the door slowly, gathering herself.

Helen was still on the phone, her back turned.

Lisabeth ran, laughing. The three people looked up and cried out as she darted by them. She was across the room and into the automatic pilot room in an instant, lightly. There was a hammer and she snatched it up,

shouting against all of them, and crashed it down upon the wires and the mechanisms. There were explosions, dancing lights, the shuddering of the ship in space, a revolving, a flying free. The man rushed into the room as she hammered and rehammered the controls into dented masses of fusing metal!

"Lisabeth!" a woman screamed.

"Lisabeth!" The man struck at her, missed, then struck again. The hammer flew from her fingers. She collapsed into dizziness. In the darkness, in the pain, she felt him groping with the controls, trying to make amends.

He was babbling hysterically.

"Ah! The control!"

Alice and Helen were swaying against the wildly rocking walls of the ship. Gravity suddenly went insane and shot them against the ceiling.

"Down!" cried the man. "Strap yourselves. We're crashing! There's a planetoid!"

A dark shape ran up onto the port of the ship, black and swift. The two women were sobbing hysterically, calling out to him to do something.

"Shut up, shut up, and let me think!" he cried. He did something with a control, the ship righted itself.

"We'll be killed, we'll be killed!" wailed the sisters. "No, no," he said, and before the planetoid loomed too close he threw his whole body against the one metal rod that was stuck and would not give. But it gave now, with a shudder of grating metal, as he fell forward.

The ship blacked out, something hit, struck, twisted, turning, shook them around. Lisabeth felt herself lifted, whirled, and brought down with stunning force upon the floor. That was all. She remembered no more....

A voice was saying, "Where are we, where are we—where?"

Dimly, Lisabeth heard the voice. There was a smell of alien atmosphere. Words came in over a muffled phone: "Planetoid One-Oh-One. Planetoid One-Oh-One. Calling crashed ship Earth Two! Crashed ship Earth Two! Can you give us a bearing on you? We'll try to send a rescue craft along."

"Hello, hello, Planetoid One-Oh-One, Radio." Lisabeth opened her eyes. John and the two women were huddled about the radio set, working it in the dim light. Through the port she could see the bleak and cold asteroid plain.

"You'd better try to get up from there," said the radio voice. "That's bad territory you're in."

"What does he mean?" asked Alice, leaning down over the man.

"This is killing land."

"Killing?"

"Killers, from Earth. Insane killers. Brought here. Dropped off to spend the rest of their lives, killing. They're happy that way."

"You're—you're joking."

"Oh, *am* I?"

The radio voice said, "We'll run through as soon as possible. Don't go outside, whatever you do. There's an atmosphere, yes, but there's likely to be some of the Inmates, too."

Alice ran to the port. "John!" She pointed down. "Down there! There are some men out there now!"

Helen seized John's arm. "Get us out of here, get us out of here!"

"They can't hurt us. Let go of me, for Pete's sake! They can't get inside." John stood staring moodily out the port.

Lisabeth lay easily, luxuriating in the nearness of death. Outside the ship. Killing Land. Killers. *Her* men, of course. Catherine of Russia's bodyguard! Come to rescue her!

She arose. Silently she tiptoed across the room. The man and the two women still stared fascinated out the port. They did not hear her. What would it be like to go below, to open the air lock wide to the terrible killers outside? Wouldn't that be fine? Let them in to kill, to destroy, to annihilate her captors! How wonderful, how simple.

Where was the air lock? Below somewhere. She was out of the room with no sound. She slipped through the lounge on the soft blue carpeting, came to the spiral ladder and descended it, smiling quietly to herself. She reached the lower deck. The air lock stood shining there.

She stabbed her hands at all kinds of red buttons, trying to find the one that yanked the lock open.

Above, she heard a frantic, surprised voice: "Where's Lisabeth?"

"Below!" Feet began running. "Lisabeth!"

"Quick!" cried Lisabeth to her hands. "Quick!"

Click! A hiss. The air lock groaned open.

Behind her, on the ladder, John leaped down. "Lisabeth!"

The lock was open. The smell of an alien world came in.

The men who had been waiting outside rushed forward, silently. They filled the lock, ten, twelve of them! They were pale and thin and trembling.

Lisabeth smiled, jerking her hand at John and crying out to the alien men.

"This man held me prisoner!" she said. "Kill him!"

The alien men seemed stupefied. They stood. Their full eyes only gazed at Lisabeth and John.

"No," one of them said, at last, as John waited for them to rush forward in the silent room. "No," the alien man said, dully. "We do not kill. We are the ones who are killed. We die. We wish to die. We do not care to live any more, ever."

There was a silence.

"You heard what I said!" cried Lisabeth.

"No," the men replied. They stood, swaying in the silence.

John fell back against a wall, sighing. Then, after a time he began to laugh with exhausted moves of his body. "Ah-ha! I see. I see!"

The men blinked in bewilderment at him.

Lisabeth's eyes flashed. She made a helpless gesture.

John recovered. He slapped his hands together and made a pushing motion, talking as a man does to a pack of dogs.

"Go on, now," he said, quietly. "Get out." He waved to the men. "Go on, *move!*"

The men did not believe him at first and then, reluctantly, whimpering in their throats, they walked from the rocket. Several of them turned and pleaded with their eyes.

"No," said John coldly. "Move out. We won't have anything to do with you."

He shut the air lock door on them.

Taking Lisabeth's pale hand John said, "It didn't work. Come along. Upstairs with you, scheming lady."

"What happened?" Alice and Helen waited as he brought Lisabeth up the ladder.

"They wanted to die," John said, smiling tiredly. "They weren't Killers, but the Ones To Be Killed. I see it all now." He laughed sharply. "To make an insane killer happy, you have to provide him a culture where people like and approve of being killed. This is such a culture. Those men wanted to be shot."

For a moment Helen stared at him. Then she said one word:

"Wanted?"

"Yes. I've read about it. They're peculiar to this planetoid. After propagating, at the age of twenty-one, they have a death drive, just as many insects and fish do. To balance this drive, we bring in a bunch of insane murderers from Earth. In this culture, a killer becomes the norm, accepted, happy. Thus we transform insanity into sanity. Roughly, anyway. If you *like* that kind of sanity." He slapped his knee, went to the radio. "Hello, Planetoid One-Oh-One, Radio! A bit of trouble. All okay. We met the Ones Who Want to Die, rather than the Killers. Lucky, I'd say."

"Very," said the radio. "We've got your bearing. There should be a ship to you in an hour. Hold on."

Helen was by the port, staring out. "Insane. Insane, all of them."

"To us, yes," said John. "To themselves, no. Their culture is sane to itself and all inhabitants within it. That's all that counts."

"I don't understand."

"Take a man who wants eighty-nine wives. On Earth he goes insane because he can't have them. He's frustrated. Bring him out here to the asteroids, put him on a planet full of women where marriage in triplicate is okay, and he becomes the norm, becomes happy."

"Oh."

"On Earth we tend to try to fit square pegs in round holes. It doesn't work. In the asteroids we've got a hole for every peg, no matter what shape. On Earth if pegs don't fit we hammer them until they split. We can't change our culture to fit them, that would be silly and inconvenient. But we can bring them out to the asteroids. There are cultures here, thousands of years old, convenient, preferable." He got up. "I need a drink. I feel terrible."

The rescue ship arrived within the hour. It came down out of space and landed neatly on the asteroid plateau. "Hello there," the pilot said.

"Hello yourself!"

They got aboard, Alice, John, Helen, and—Lisabeth.

Their ship was to be towed into a repair port and returned to them later, on Earth.

"I want to call Chicago," said Helen, instantly, when they reached port.

John sighed. "We have us a close shave, and all you want to do is call Chicago. William, again?"

"Suppose it is?" she snapped.

"Nothing. Go ahead. I suppose they'll let you use the space phone." He nodded at the captain of the rescue ship, who said, "Certainly. Right over here."

Lisabeth did not move. They had taken her to a little room and locked her in once more. There would be no more mistakenly unlocked doors. It was all over. Now there was nothing.

"Hello, Chicago. William? This is Helen!" Laughter.

A pouring of drinks. "I," said Alice, "am going," she lifted the glass, "to," she went on, "get very drunk."

The captain of the ship came in. "We'll be landing on Thirty-Six in about ten minutes. You've had bad luck."

"It's all right now. A bit thick for me." John nodded at Helen cooing and stroking the phone, at Alice mixing a drink, and at Lisabeth standing, white and silent, in her little cell.

The captain raised his brows and nodded, wryly.

John lighted a cigarette and moved forward. "Suppose I thought I was Christ, captain? Would you take me to a planetoid where everybody thought *they* were saviors of the world?"

"Heavens, no." The captain laughed. "You'd kill each other off as 'impostors.' No, we'd take you to a culture prepared to accept and take you in as the *only* world savior."

"One that would *lie* to me, say they believed I was a savior?"

"No. No lies. Only the truth. The people must really *believe* in order that you, as a messiah, may be happy. The entire idea of sending insane people out here to various planets, is to be sure they'll live happily the rest of their lives. So such a complex must live in a culture where people actually think he *is* a savior."

"It must be difficult to find enough room on your planets for all those who think they're saviors, mustn't it?"

"We've a Charting Committee for that. Nine thousand Earthmen, hopelessly insane, beyond treatment on Earth, think they're messiahs. That means a waiting list. There are only forty-seven thousand available cultures on forty-seven thousand planetoids between here and Saturn, and in the other sun systems. And only two thousand of these cultures are gullible enough to accept a false redeemer. Therefore, there's a long list of such applicants waiting to travel to some culture when an older savior dies. We couldn't possibly introduce two self-deluded Gautama Buddhas into one culture simultaneously. Oh! what dissension that would cause! But, in event of one John the Baptist, for instance, we could, at the same time, accommodate one Caesar, one Pontius Pilate, one Matthew, one Mark, one Luke, one John, along with him. You see?"

"I think so."

"When you put one Mohammed into juxtaposition with one pseudo-contemporary of ancient times, history repeats itself. All the drama of ancient times is being re-enacted here on these planetoids. Everybody's happy, insanity is banished, drama lives."

"Sounds faintly blasphemous."

"Hardly. They're happy, normal, to themselves. See that planet, there? Somewhere on it is a Joan of Arc listening for angel voices. Over there, see! A Mecca waits for a Mohammed to appear so they may finish out their acts."

"It's frightening."

"Somewhat." The captain walked off, away. Lisabeth watched him go.

Asteroid Number 36 swung up and under the ship!

Other planetoids whirled by. Lisabeth watched them from her cell. They moved on the deep ocean blackness, full of some hidden drama and tragedy she could not fathom.

"There's Othello's planet!" cried John. "I read about that one."

"Oh." Alice was drinking steadily. She sat in a rubberoid chair, her eyes glazed. "Oh. Well, well. Isn't that nice, isn't it?"

"Othello and Desdemona and Iago! Warriors and banners and trumpets. Gosh, what it must be like down there."

More planetoids, more, more, Lisabeth counted them with her simple, moving, pink lips. Moving, moving. More. There, and there!

"Down there somewhere is a man who thinks he's Shakespeare!"

"Good for him, good," murmured Alice, putting down her drink, lazily.

"Stratford on Avon's down there, and strolling minstrels. All you do is bring some crazy fellow from Maine who thinks he's Shakespeare up here and there's the culture waiting for him, to really make him into Shakespeare! And do you know, Alice—Alice, are you listening?" John breathed swiftly. "They live and die just as the famous men lived and died. They die the same deaths, in imitation. A woman who thinks she is Cleopatra puts an asp to her flesh. A man, who thinks he is Socrates,

quaffs the hemlock! They live out old lives and die the old deaths. What an immensely beautiful insanity it is."

"William, the things you say!" cooed Helen into the space phone. "I'll be in Chicago next week, William. Yes, I'm all right. I'll see you then, sweets."

"Oh, pish," said Alice.

"This is the best thing for Lisabeth," John said. "We shouldn't feel badly."

"We certainly had to wait long enough." Alice dropped her glass. "Put in application six months ago."

"There were one thousand Catherines of Russia. One died yesterday. Lisabeth will fill her position. She'll rule unwisely and not too well, but happily."

Helen kissed her lips in front of the phone, pouting her red moist lips. "You *know* I do," she said, eyes shut. "Love you, William, love you." She was speaking softly over a few million miles of space.

"Time!" shouted the audio in the room. "Landing time!"

John got up and smoked a last cigarette nervously, his face wincing.

Catherine of Russia looked out at the three people. She saw Alice drink quietly and stupidly and John standing in a litter of cigarette butts under his shoes. And Helen was lying full length on a rubberoid couch, murmuring softly into the phone, stroking it.

Now John came to the window of the cell. She did not answer when he said hello. He did not believe in her.

"Sometimes I wonder where we'll all wind up," he said, simply, looking at Catherine. "Myself on a planetoid where I can burn gambling machines all day? First chop them with axes, then pour kerosene on them, then burn them? And what about Alice? Will she wind up on a planetoid where oceans of gin and canals of sherry are the rule? And Helen? Will she land on a place full of handsome men, thousands of them? And nobody to reprimand her?"

A bell rang. "Asteroid Thirty-Six! Landing! Landing! Time, time!"

John turned and walked to Alice. "Stop drinking." He turned to Helen. "Get off the phone, we're landing!" He took the phone away from her when she would not stop.

Catherine of Russia was ready for the welcome that came as she stepped from the ship. Streets were flooded with people, gilt carriages awaited, banners flew, somewhere a band played, cannons exploded into the roaring atmosphere. She began to cry. They believed in her! They were her friends, all of these persons with smiling faces, all of these people in correct, shining costume. The palace awaited at the end of the avenue.

"Catherine, Catherine!"

"Your Majesty! Welcome Home!"

"Oh, your Majesty!"

"I've been away so long," cried Catherine, holding her hands to her tearful face. She straightened herself. She controlled her voice, finally. "Such a long, long time. And now I'm back. It's good, so good to be home."

"Your Majesty, your Majesty!"

They kissed her hand, before conducting her to a carriage. Smiling, laughing, she called for wine. They brought her vast goblets of clear wine. She drank and threw a goblet shattering on the street! And a band played and drums beat and guns thundered! And just as the horses pranced and the French and English Ambassadors stepped into the carriage, Catherine turned to give one last silent look at the ship from which she had stepped. For a moment she was quiet and for this brief time she knew a silence and a restive sadness. In the open port of the ship were three people, a man and two women, waving, waving at her.

"Who are those people, your Majesty?" asked the Spanish Ambassador.

"I don't know," whispered Catherine.

"Where are they from?"

"Some strange, far away place."

"Do you know them, your Majesty?"

"Know them?" She put her hand out, almost to wave to them, then put her hand down. "No. I don't think so. Odd people. Strange people. From some long ago, some horrible land somewhere. Insane, all three of them. One works big game machines, another talks strangely over phones, and a third drinks, and drinks, forever. Really, quite insane." Her eyes were dull. Now, her attention sharpened. She cracked her hand down. "Give them notice!"

"Your Majesty!"

"An hour's notice to get out of Saint Petersburg!"

"Yes, your Majesty!"

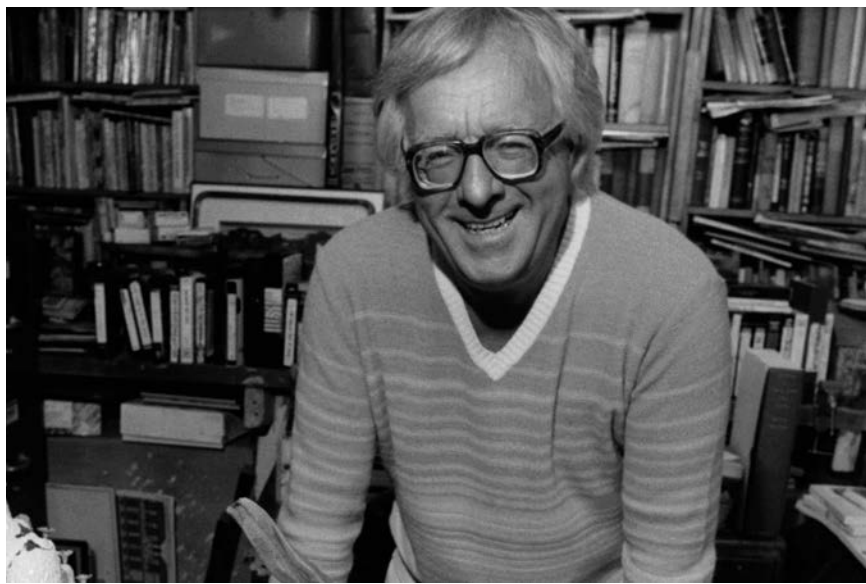
"I won't have strangers here, understand!"

"Yes, your Majesty!"

The carriage moved down the street, the horses dancing, the crowd hallooing, the band playing, leaving the silver rocket ship behind.

She did not look back again, not even when the man in the silver ship cried, "Good-by, good-by!" for his voice was drowned when the crowd on all sides rushed warmly in, engulfing her in happiness, shouting, "Catherine, Catherine, Mother of all the Russias!"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ray Bradbury inspired generations of readers and viewers to dream, think, and create. His childhood was spent in the Midwestern small town of Waukegan, Illinois, and he mastered his craft in Los Angeles, where he forged a special creative bond with the city and its many cultures, raised his family, and drew as feverishly as he wrote. He often told the story of an encounter with a carnival magician, Mr. Electrico, who reached out to the twelve-year-old Bradbury, touched him with his energy-charged sword, and commanded, “Live forever!” Bradbury said, “I decided that was the greatest idea I had ever heard. I started writing every day. I never stopped.” And the literary landscape—as well as the broader American cultural landscape, from Hollywood to NASA—would never be the same again.

During a career that spanned seventy-plus years, he wrote more than 400 short stories and nearly fifty books across a variety of genres. He also penned numerous poems, essays, plays, operas, teleplays, and screenplays, making him one of the most productive and admired writers of our time, as well as one of the most widely translated in the world.



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FOUNDERS

ANDREW VAN WYK

+1.424.341.4121

andrew@tinywindows.xyz

VAN DITTHAVONG

+1.323.905.2050

van@tinywindows.xyz