

ORANGE GROVES OUT TO THE HORIZON

RICHARD WADHOLM

THE WAY THEY WORK IT, the prison calls ahead of time. This robot voice says, "You are about to receive a call from an inmate of the federal prison system." They ask if you are willing to accept the call, and that's a question you want to think about.

Ken called while I was crawling around behind our network server, testing ports on a flaky router.

I knew he would call me. All his other friends had invested their futures in wives and children, and could not be imposed upon. Who else did we have but each other?

I tried to picture him the way he would be now, with a little gravity to the eyelids. An aging marsupial, anxious and friendly. But all I could see was the way he was in the tenth grade. His earnest sarcasm. Long hair, washed furiously, the way boys do - without conditioner, so that it hung straight and dry as late-summer grass.

In my mind, the greetings come and go—How are you holding up? No, too brave. Are they treating you right? Right according to whom?

And before I could settle on what to say, he was there, singing *Time is on My Side*. I'm sure he thought that was hilarious.

"Jesus you're stupid sometimes," I said.

"You sound like my last performance review at work." He laughed—*Phoo phoo phoo*, like he was laughing around a cigarette.

"Is that the way they talked to you at work?"

"Come on, man. Like it matters now."

"Look, I can call you stupid. I'm your friend. I don't like it your work called you stupid."

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“Reliant Pharmaceuticals, those fucks. They wouldn’t know *E. coli* from *mi culo*, you know what I’m saying, Hoss?”

Yet they knew the recipe for ricin when they found it on his computer. They recognized its traces in his one-cup coffee maker. How stupid could they be? A bad thought came to me, like a craving. It gnawed at me, wouldn’t leave me alone. “You sure you had nothing, you know—personal in mind for anybody.”

“You mean, was I going to poison their lame asses? You know I don’t believe in that revenge shit. I wasn’t going to hurt anybody.”

“Ricin. The hell were you thinking, anyway?”

“Gophers. You know.”

I could tell you what happened. Ken had seen the recipe on a web site somewhere. He wanted to know if it worked. Does that sound stupid? Not if you’re Ken Rafael, who had been a child prodigy in chemistry, (ask any kid in our high school, they’ll tell you.) who had taken a low level job at Reliant Pharmaceuticals, thinking to work his way up, and then found himself stuck there.

I said, “When did you start smoking?”

“You sort of have to in here. Cigarettes are like the medium of exchange. Either that or some things I’m not about to give up.”

I couldn’t help wondering what he had to do just to use the toilet. Jesus.

“Isn’t there anything you can do?”

“Doesn’t look like it. Federal sentencing guidelines say 136 months. I like to think about it as 136 months. Doesn’t sound so bad that way, does it.”

It didn’t until I added it up. Then I raged for awhile. I think Ken was amused. Or, maybe he just appreciated the pity.

My mouth got ahead of me. I heard myself talking bullshit. How I’d talk to his family, we’d file an appeal. We’d do more than that—we would sue the government for malicious prosecution. Anti-terrorism laws, my ass. Some ambitious prosecutor saw the word ‘ricin’ in Ken’s arrest report and got all stage struck.

“Bad enough that the government steals thirteen years of your life. But they stole your last year with Katy, and *that’s* unforgivable.”

Did I cross the line, talking about Katy? I liked her. Ken had always been a sport about it. She was one of those girls you don’t notice till you

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notice her, and then you can't look away.

So maybe my rhetoric got a little over-heated. Maybe I said more than I intended.

"They did give me bail," Ken pointed out.

"The judge did."

"Can I tell you the truth? Just me and you?"

I imagined a CD burning on some machine somewhere, a technician gently jiggling a microphone.

"Me and you," I said. "Sure."

"That last year with Katy was the best year of our marriage. I know how it can be for some people. I know with your father it was unexpected, and shocking. And I'm real sorry about that. But for Katy and me, it was magic time. Every moment was cast in this sweet light of mortality. Every day mattered. Even the days in court. Even the days when she was really sick. And the rest of the time—if we wanted to go some place, we went. If we wanted to spend money, we spent it. It was the end of the world, Hoss! All the rules were lifted."

"I don't mean to intrude here."

"You're like your dad." He said it like I was supposed to laugh.

"Really? Like my dad, huh?"

"Your dad, man. He would make people fidget. He had that gift. Remember when we lost your rat? That funeral?"

"I don't want to talk about Butter, man."

"I'm just saying, that funeral was too much."

"He did it for me, 'cause I was in mourning."

"Mourning."

"I felt like a rat murderer."

"I told you not to launch him. Didn't I tell you? The space program is no place for pets or relatives."

When we were eight, we launched model rockets from the orange grove at the end of the street. I was the chief engineer. Ken, with his empathy for bugs and rats, was the mission payload specialist.

We built our rockets in the old fallout shelter that my dad had dug in the backyard. We called it our "Launch Complex."

My father wanted me to use the garage for all our gluing and painting, because the ventilation was better. I explained to him, with eight-year old

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gravity, that the fallout shelter was protected by sandbags. You know—in case of an accident.

We didn't expect any accidents. We'd been launching vermin into space all summer. I was confident enough to launch my pet rat, Butter. The fallout shelter just seemed like the place to do military things with rockets.

"Your dad, was it his idea for the funeral?"

"His idea for the flag-draped shoebox." Though he would have settled for a military honor guard.

We buried the shoebox in the orange grove, where Butter's capsule had disappeared. Ken had a sandbox shovel. He was in charge of digging the hole. I was in charge of the interment. The whole time we're burying the shoebox, My father is coaching us on how we should live up to Butter's example. Practical stuff: "Do your homework. Don't watch too much TV. Never use hair oil in a pure oxygen environment, like a space capsule, because that's how we lost the Apollo 7." You know—life lessons.

When we were finished, and the shoebox was covered over, he gripped me by the shoulder. He became reflective.

"We used to wander though here every evening, your mother and I. This was all orange groves." He waved his arm. "From Mechler Street to the Towne Center Plaza. We felt like pioneers of a new frontier. I can't think of a better place for an explorer like Butter to end up."

This is my favorite dad-memory of all time, you want to know the truth. For all the times he embarrassed me, I think of him, standing over Butter's grave, and no cool father will do.

We were silent a moment, Ken smoking, me watching the calls stack up on my phone. "Do they still make movie posters where you work?"

"That was at Warner Bros. I'm at Chiat Day now."

"Do they make movie posters? I got some guys in here want movie posters."

"We're working on a recipe book. For the Jelly Belly people. You want to hear my favorite? 2 lemon lime + 1 spearmint = gin and tonic."

"Gin and tonic! We likes, we likes. I'll tell you, I could use a G-and-T right now."

"Let me send you some Jelly Bellies."

Phoo phoo phoo. Ken had gotten used to smoking, I could tell.

"You remember that last day before you went off to San Diego State?"

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Your father caught us in the fallout shelter? That speech he gave us? Cracked my *ass*, man. When he gave you that cream depilatory, I thought you were going to shit.”

“I really don’t want to talk about this.”

“Aw, what? You make it sound so terrible. That was the first time I heard the Crosby Stills and Nash album, remember that? Great fucking record, wasn’t it?”

“It was a pretty good album.” Probably not the cultural watershed that Ken remembered, but pretty good. Parts of it make me just cringe to listen to now. All those twee little pop tunes from Graham Nash. David Crosby in his yowza-yowza voice, almost cutting his hair.

But there was the one song at the end, *Wooden Ships*. A song to the apocalypse, full of autumn light and sadness. I remember it was the first pop song I’d ever heard in E-minor. In a few years, every song would be in E-minor, but *Wooden Ships* summed up the grave romance of the age.

That whole week before I left for college, I was under its spell. Who knows what I might have said to my father if I had been listening to Tommy James, say, or Sly and the Family Stone. Rock and roll records, full of cigarettes and dope and nasty sex—but forgiving, where poetry is remorseless.

“Still brings tears to my eyes, that song. Don’t it bring tears to your eyes?”

Ken was playing air guitar with the phone, so that our connection crackled in time to the beat in his head. He hummed the guitar solo: “Nu-nu-nu, nu-nu nu, nu-nu-nu. Come on, motherfucker. Don’t get shy on me. Sing along!”

“I’m singing on the inside.”

“You’re shy. Like your dad. I swear, Hoss, if you end up like him, hanging from your automatic garage door, you only got yourself to blame.”

“That’s not funny, talking about my dad.”

“You know what Katy always said? That your dad would’na been mad if we’da let him join us. Can you see your dad, talking all his future-shit while he’s blazing on mushrooms? Showing us all his *Popular Science* magazines and shit? Can you see it?”

He was banging on the table at his end, in giddy happiness. I could hear it over the phone. I wanted to say something to bring him around, because it

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was my dad after all. And he should be respected. But Ken was laughing so hard, he wouldn't have heard me.

I was headed off to college, my freshman semester. Ken and Katy cut school to see me off. Katy was draping this giant American flag around the inside of the fallout shelter. Ken was roasting some 'shrooms in my little sister's Ezy Bake Oven.

My dad was supposed to be at work. I never even heard his car pull into the driveway. You are a person of a certain age, you will recall the heartrending zzzwwiiicck of a needle pulled across a vinyl surface. Katy Grossman, whose pupils were already dilated to inky periods, went, "Oh. My. God." The shelter's steel door cracked on its rusted hinge, and pushed back, and my dad blinked around at the lot of us. His eyes went right to me. I always thought that was a neat trick—you throw open a door into a darkened room and instinctively pick your son from a crowd. He had been on the road for an hour, his forehead was flushed. His hair was plastered down to his eyes in little curls, like ivy. He looked like he had stopped someplace for a few beers. He had this breathless glow on his face, like George Jetson, bringing home a new disintegrator ray.

He said, "I got a few things for your trip." Took me a moment to realize that this wasn't a raid, that he was happy to see me.

He had some bags from Montgomery Wards. From the smaller bag, he pulled out a pocket calculator. I think it had something like 1K of memory, and would have cost him \$300 at the time.

I showed it to Ken. "Now I can calculate missile trajectories." It was a joke. Ken and I hadn't launched a rocket since we'd lost Butter. But Katy laughed. My father just beamed. He had such plans for me.

He held out a jar of cream in a little box colored that sort of embarrassed-pink of feminine hygiene products. "It's called a cream depilatory," he said.

I just look at him. "You've got to be kidding."

"What do you think? It's just out on the market the last couple of years."

I didn't get mad, or mortified. I had to remind myself, this was George Jetson talking. The guy who had always worried I'd use hair oil in a space capsule. To him, cream depilatories were all about the future, when men wouldn't bother with barbaric daily rituals involving edged objects against their throats.

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I said, "I think guys are supposed to shave, aren't they?"

"Don't be narrow minded. You don't want to start shaving yet. Once you start, your beard grows in, your face toughens up. Girls won't like to kiss you anymore." In that fast-talking pitchman's voice like Chick Hearn at courtside. He looked to Katy. "What do you say? You kiss a fella with a stubbly face? It kind of hurts, doesn't it?"

Her pupils were dilated into empty holes. I thought she would shrug or snicker just to deflect attention from herself, but she didn't. She patted my father's arm and told him he was a good dad.

I think she felt sorry for him. We were, all three of us, blazing out of our minds. The world was our in-joke. And here was my father, maybe the world's unhippest guy. Ken always said he liked my dad, but even now, calling from prison, he couldn't talk about him without laughing.

"You remember that jacket your dad tried to give you?" He snapped his fingers at me over the phone. "Was that gay or what?"

"It wasn't gay. It was space age."

"Space Age. If you say so. What was his fascination with Velcro?"

"He saw it in a science fiction movie."

"A sci-fi movie!" He was laughing, a high, giddy hoot, no cigarette. "He tried to make you wear it, you remember what you said? *It smells of science*, that's what you said!"

"Did I say that?"

"Honest to God, Bro. I don't know what that means, even to this day. But it sounded so cool. You should've seen your dad's face when you said that."

"Ken? Shut up, all right?"

The jacket was lipstick red, which I knew in my mind was an emergency color, to stand out against a snow bank. Like I was going to school in Juneau Alaska instead of San Diego. Ken was looking away, trying not to smirk.

"It's double-lined," my father said. "With Velcro seals at the wrists and collar. Velcro is the absolute future. Did you see *2001: A Space Odyssey*? All those people on that spaceship to the moon, walking around in Velcro slippers."

"I like what I've got on," I said.

He blinked a little, behind his glasses. "That old Army jacket? I had that

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thing in the garage since 1951. I can't believe you even dug it up. Try this on. It cost me \$40 at Montgomery Wards."

"I like my army jacket."

"Don't be a pain in the ass here. That old army jacket makes you look like a bum."

The Army jacket made me look like Marci Singletary's older brother, just back from Vietnam, and smoldering-quiet. Full of stories he didn't want to talk about.

I could have explained this to him. But my friends were enjoying the show, and I was peaking on mushrooms, so I said to him, "You know what I *really* want? How about one of those plastic birds that bobs up and down into a glass of water! Fucking bird, man—*that's* science!"

Ken spluttered. Katy put her hand to her mouth. My father didn't know what to say. He held the jacket out, looking for what—the flaw he had missed? His hands snapped open and closed, and the fiber filled sleeves made crunch-sounds. "I didn't get you anything else," he said, like the jacket was part of some larger negotiation between us.

He looked around at Katy and Ken, as if he'd only just realized they were in the room with us.

Katy had put a hand on his arm as the talk had gotten mean. Now he shrugged away from her. He swept back his little sweaty ringlets and peered at her. "Are you high on something?" As if he could have picked a drug user out of a police lineup. This was an accusation he'd gotten out of Readers' Digest, was all. Something to whip out on The Kids when they've got you cornered.

For years after that, I would start to feel bad about my father, and then remember him all wild-haired and sweaty, threatening Katy of all people, with the police. Katy, who had done nothing but feel sorry for him.

"You people need to be in school, or some place, and you're obviously on drugs. I'm going to call the police." What he did, of course, was go in the house and drink himself to sleep.

I remember Katy hiccupping with terror that her mom would have her drug tested for mushrooms. The drug test—this too was part of my father's Age of Miracles. Like the cream depilatory, an expression of technology, purified of any cultural context—And crude, but only in the engineering sense. Like the \$300 pocket calculator, it was barely more than a prototype.

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But it whispered of a world to come.

“Hoss, I know you’ve gotta get back to your life. But I have a favor to ask.” Cigarette smoke thickened his voice. “I’ve got some friends down in your neck. Acolytes, you might say. You actually know them—Thumper and his lady, Agnes Something? Yeah, you remember. Somehow they got this fool idea—from where, who knows? — “ *Phoo phoo phoo*. “That the world is supposed to end at 3:15 AM on November 26.”

I got a flash. This was why Ken had called.

“That stuff in the coffee grinder, that was for them?”

Came this aspirated breath, like Ken was drawing oxygen through his cigarette.

“You need to be careful what you say on the phone, Hoss. Call from prison, you never know who might be listening.”

“I understand,” I said. “I was only speaking hypothetically.”

“Hypothetically. There you go. All this apocalyptic shit was just hypothetical. I mean, it was always sort of a game, anyway, you know what I’m saying? We’d put on the old Sabbath albums and light the black candles, and egg each other on with the spooky parts from those *Left Behind* books. I never took it seriously, but I had this friend, all right? *This friend*. I guess he got caught up a little bit. He had a tragedy in his life, like the way I lost Katy, and, I tell you, the end of the world looked awfully close. And, well—I hear that he entrusted a little package to Thumper’s mom.”

‘*A little package.*’ —Ricin, is what he meant. The stuff he’d been brewing in the coffee pot at his desk was, I don’t know, a personal stash maybe.

I must have started swearing because immediately he’s trying to talk me down.

“You start to read *Revelations*, Hoss, it’s a scary book. Let me tell you. Some of the things in that book, the locusts, with the head of a man? A-and the tail of a scorpion? That’s some fucked up shit. You take that shit literally, you don’t want to be around for it.”

“And you were going to give Thumper and Agnes an easy way out.”

“My friend. Anyway, the package went to Thumper’s mom. She still lives in the same house she used to. Thumper himself is in jail to the end of December on a misunderstanding involving some car parts.”

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"Nothing that God won't forgive him for."

I heard the pop and squeak of a cigarette, drawn too hard. "Just get the package from Thumper's mom and dump it in the ocean," he said. "Don't dump it off Santa Monica pier. People fish off the pier. Drive some place down the coast. Where there's no houses."

I tried to think of some place along the coast with no houses.

"You know you've made me an accomplice."

"Accomplice. That's an awfully big word, Hoss. These people you're helping out, they're not criminals. They're like me and you. They always thought something would happen. Right? Something beyond themselves. Only it never did. You were in the 60s with me. You know what I'm saying."

"That was forty years ago," I reminded him.

"Forty years ago, my ass. Look at our president! The most starry-eyed romantic since John F. Kennedy."

"What president are talking about here?"

"Come on, Hoss! He was there when we were. He may not come out and say it, but he understands that old magic."

"Which old magic are we talking about?"

"Our song, Hoss! Wooden Ships! The end of the world."

"I thought the end of the world was supposed to be scary. Wasn't it?"

"Ah. A little anxiety keeps you sharp. Like—remember how it used to feel, that first week of school? Summer's over, and suddenly everything matters a little more than it did last week. That's how it is now. You notice how people shut up when the news is on? Autumn is in the air, forever."

"I don't remember it in quite that way." Which was a lie. I remembered the in-jokes, and the snickering sarcasm. And the music. The college girls who listened to Simon and Garfunkel, all trembly-lipped and shiny-eyed. The sons of garage mechanics, who listened to Black Sabbath and waited on the end of the world. We were, all of us, waiting on something.

"Look at your dad. He never gave up on the future. What was that he put into his note? Orange trees all over...Something something."

"Orange groves, out to the horizon."

"That's it. He was writing about how your mother and him were the pioneers of a new frontier. *When I look at the world*, he said, *all I see are orange groves, out to the horizon.*"

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Maybe the air conditioning was up too high, suddenly I had pimples up and down my arms.

"How did you know what was in his suicide note?"

"I know. He got it from me."

"You coached my father through his suicide note?"

I started to say something bad, caught the reflection of myself in a darkened computer monitor, the sweat-curled hairs on my forehead. I looked too ridiculous to make threats against a convict in prison.

"Jesus. You make it sound like I put his neck in the noose. We talked. Is all. I called him up to get your new work number. He was getting on in years. I think he was afraid he had cancer."

"My father told you he had cancer?"

"His, uhh, personals were giving him problems, you know what I'm saying?" Ken was playing games with his cigarette smoke now. I could hear the laminar hush as he lofted smoke rings at the ceiling. "You want to keep an eye down there too, Hoss. We aren't getting any younger ourselves."

Like I needed to hear this just now.

"What's wrong, Hoss?"

"What?"

"Thought I'd slowed you up there. You all right? You still with me?"

I didn't want to tell him about my check up, or the test results I was waiting on. Ken isn't the sort you go to with personal information.

"They do autopsies on suicides," I told him. "My father did not have cancer."

"Well. Hmm. Joke's on him I guess, huh? Listen, I'm running out of change here. You gonna help me with Thumper or what?"

All I could think about was that day in the shelter, I remember my dad with this sly smile that seems to go with terrible confessions. Him, talking almost to himself: "You wait on a moment for half your life," he whispered, so quiet that nobody in the room heard him but his son. "You never think what happens when the moment's almost passed. My boy is going away and I'll never see him again."

That turn of phrase clings to me like sea grass. *My boy is going away.* It seemed so quaint at the time, I'm standing in front of him, and we seem to be discussing someone in the room with us. Some little kid, still getting all wide-eyed at mice shot into space.

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I came back for Christmas break, and the army jacket I had refused to give up was long since replaced by the sweatshirt of a girl who promised to love me forever. (Don't ask me to remember her name). My dad is laughing at all my jokes with that blustery good humor he saved for his bosses and people he wanted to impress.

But the little boy with the rockets is gone, and all his secrets gone with him. Gone where no one, not even college freshmen can bring them back.

Ken was restive. I could hear him jetting streams of smoke out the corner of his mouth. "I knew that note-business was going to cause me problems."

"Maybe your friend needs to get somebody else for this business."

I wanted to beat the living shit out of Ken Rafael. Him and his Anarchist Cookbook hobbies. I wanted to go up north and visit him in his cell at Sears Pointe and shoot him and shoot him and shoot him.

"I've got to go," I managed to say.

"What about old Thumper and Agnes."

"Maybe that's a personal problem."

"Come on. You don't mean that." Sporting and sly. He knew I couldn't leave Thumper on his own. Thumper had stepped in for me once, when I was jumped at party. I owed him, Ken knew it.

"I don't know what I'll do. I have to think."

"Whatever you say, Hoss." Ken began laughing. A hoarse, gurgling, smokers' laugh. Right from the lungs. "I'm just checking my calendar here. You know that November 26 is this Thursday? Wouldn't it be a kick in the ass if it was true, the world ended?"

I had the words on my tongue—*Keep a good thought, hey?* But Ken had what he wanted, he didn't stick around for me to change my mind.

The drive out to Thumper's mom's house was a slog, but I had a good roach in the ashtray. The talk radio was all about an asteroid, set to hit the earth in 182 years. Scientists had already calculated the probable strike zone in the western Pacific. The seismic wave will reach over 400 feet high. The rain of mud and ash will obliterate all sunlight and plunge the earth into a perpetual winter, ending all food crops, and soon after that, all life.

I mentioned the asteroid to Thumper's mom. She just looked at me. "I'll mark my calendar."

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She handed me a vial through the door, brown glass with a cork stopper. Did she know what was in it? I tried to ask her, the door closed in my face.

I dumped the ricin at an oil reclamation center, behind an auto parts store. Not an ideal solution, I admit it. But better than dumping it in the ocean. Anybody messing with used oil is already dressed for hazardous waste. Besides, what did it matter? We were all going to die anyway.

The talk radio going home was all about a new particle collider being built in Switzerland, which might liberate enough energy to create an “exotic vacuum state,” which would spread at the speed of light to engulf the entire universe, eliminating all life as we know it.

Why anyone would do something like this was a topic on all the call-in shows. Much hysteria. Everyone’s having a hell of a good time.

I mean, let’s be honest. So long as we’re all dying together, it seems like a game, doesn’t it?

And then there’s the message waiting on my answering machine. The results of my prostate exam are in, my doctor wants to talk. Nothing to worry about, Mr. Hostettler. But we’d like to run a few follow-ups just to see what we’ve got here.

I got a cold clutch in the pit of my stomach, that no exotic vacuum state could touch.

You are supposed to sit down and have a drink at a time like this. A stiff Scotch, that’s the traditional sacrament for mortal news. I looked in the refrigerator, and came up with a Red Bull. For comfort, I put on the Crosby Stills & Nash album.

It’s amazing how nostalgic you can get about the future, especially at the moment it drains away. All the apocalyptic vision of Wooden Ships seemed suddenly quaint. Old enemies escaping together to where the wind is fair and the wine is sweet, and the world can start over. It’s nice, isn’t it?

Let me tell you my vision of the future. One of them, anyway. The one that sticks with me now, as I’m sitting at my breakfast nook, amid the junk mail from last week and a half-empty box of Frosted Shredded Wheat.

I think I must have been fifteen, and just thinking about heading off to college, and what my life as a young man would be like.

Katy Grossman is with me. She has that college girl look. You know – not beautiful, but good looking. We share an apartment in Alhambra, or

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Westwood, overlooking an urban park. Our walls are a gallery of black light posters. The coffee table shows off our “display bong,” though we keep an everyday water pipe in the closet. We listen to space rock operas on the stereo and discuss “serious” science fiction.

All the talk about children is still a couple of years away. Just the same, we keep toys in the closet.

Right next to the everyday bong is an old wagon, packed in tight with cardboard tubes, wings of unpainted balsa wood. An old 12-volt car battery for ignition, a launch stand, a set of solid fuel primers in a manila envelope.

The only thing missing is a half-loaf of bread in a paper bag, and a tin of Vienna sausages. But my father will bring those.

We’ll buy cokes off the ice cream truck that stops across the street from the orange grove, and the driver will turn off his music just to hear us set off our big J-30 two-stage rocket. See the knot of smoke fifty feet up as it pops its payload stage.

My dad will squeeze my shoulder like he’s hanging onto a luge. He won’t even hear himself yelling, but I will— “Go, Butter! Go, Butter! Go, Butter!”

We’ll cup our hands against the sun to follow his progress into the hot, blue, evening sky.

It will be great.



Like lots of writers, **RICHARD WADHOLM** spends his time trying to figure how to survive on the tailings of a really cool hobby. His work has appeared in *Asimov’s*, *ElectricStory.com*, and *Polyphony*, as well as several *Best of the Year* anthologies.

“Orange Groves Out to the Horizon” began as a rumination on the 1960s, and on the romance of annihilation. The story took seed after the imprisonment of a childhood friend, who really did make ricin in his office coffee maker, although the friend is not the person in the story, and his conversation—like the 1960s itself—is completely imaginary.