

ROCKET NIGHT

It was Rocket Night at our daughter's elementary school, the night when parents, students, and the administration gather to place the least liked child in a rocket and shoot him into the stars. Last year we placed Laura Jackson into the capsule, a short, squat girl known for her limp dresses which hung crookedly on her body. The previous year we'd sent off a boy from India whose name none of us could remember. Before that our daughter was in kindergarten so we'd yet to become part of the Rose Hill community.

Rocket Night is an event which almost all of us look forward to, falling in late October when the earth is covered by orange and yellows. Our children have begun to lay out their Halloween costumes and their sweaters are heavy with the scent of autumn. It's late enough into the school year for us to get a sense of the best children to send off. For alliances are made early at Rose Hill. Our children gather in the mornings to share their secrets on playgrounds, while the other children, those with stars and galaxies in their futures, can be seen at the edges of the field, playing with sticks alone or staring into mud puddles at drowned worms.

Meet and greet is held, as is custom, in the school gymnasium, and we mingle in the warm glow of its lacquered floors, surrounded by wooden bleachers and parallel bars, talking about soccer games, math homework, and the difficulty of finding time for errands with our children's busy schedules. Our kids run the perimeter, some playing tag, others collecting in clusters of boys around the fifth-graders with portable game players, the girls across the room in their own clusters. Susan Beech brought her famous home-baked cupcakes, the Stowes brought Hawaiian Punch, and we brought plastic cups and cocktail napkins and placed them on the table among the baked goods and apple slices.

The boy to be sent off, I believe his name was Daniel, stood near his parents, holding his mother's skirt, looking unkempt. One could immediately see the reason he'd been chosen by our children. There's a hand-me-down quality to the clothing of those selected, the mildewed stench of thrift stores clinging to their corduroys. This boy's collar sat askew, revealing the small white undershirt beneath, and his brown slacks were held tightly by an oversized belt whose end flopped lazily from his side. The boy, our daughter told us, brought stubby pencils to school whose chewed-up ends got stuck in sharpeners. He had the habit of picking his nose. His lunches, she reported, were nothing more than stale crackers and a warm box of chocolate milk. There was a smear of cupcake frosting on the corner of his mouth, and seeing this detail, we knew our children had chosen well. He was the sort of child who makes one proud of one's own children, and we looked over to our daughter, who was holding court with a

devil's square, tightening then spreading her small fingers within the folded paper while counting out the letters O-R-A-N-G-E.

At eight o'clock the principal took the stage beneath the basketball hoop, a whine from the microphone as he adjusted it. He turned to us with open arms and welcomed us, the parents and students of Rose Hill, to another year together. He thanked Susan for her cupcakes, and all of us for our contributions to make the evening's festivities so successful, and then, forgetting the boy's name, he turned to the family and said, "Donald, we hope your journey into space will be a joyful one." We all applauded. Admittedly, his parents applauded less than others, looking a bit pale, but we acknowledged that the parents of the chosen often do seem pale. They are the sort of parents who come to soccer games and sit alone in the stands, a gloomy sadness hanging over them, whose cars make the most noise when they pull into our school's parking lot, and whose faces, within the automobile's dark interiors, remind us not of the joys of parenthood, but of some sorrow none of us wish to share. Seeing them standing there with their child, we realized, with relief, that with the departure of their son we would also gain their departure, and we quietly acknowledged the all-round benefit.

The principal's speech delivered, he invited us to join him on the playground where the capsule sat, cockpit open, its silver sides illuminated by the glow from the launch tower. It's a truth that the child to be sent into space grows reticent upon seeing the glowing tower and the gaping casket-like rocket. We saw the small boy cling to his mother, unwilling to leave her side, and so we let our children loose. I watched my daughter pry the boy's fingers from his mother's leg as two larger fifth-graders seized his waist and dragged him away. The nurse, a kindly woman, helped to subdue the parents. She took the mother aside and whispered to her, while the gym coach placed a meaty hand on the father's shoulder and assured him that the capsule was stocked with water and food tablets, plenty for lasting the boy a long time into the future. To be honest, it's a mystery how long such supplies last. It's a small compartment within that capsule and we are all aware funding was cut to our district earlier this year, but still we assured them there was nothing to worry of. The boy, if hungry for company, had a small microphone inside the shell which would allow him to speak to himself of his journey, his thoughts, and the mystery of the universe.

The boy was strapped into the capsule, his hands secured, and he looked out at us. He spoke then, for the first and only time that night. He asked if he might have one of his pencils with him; it was in his pencil box, he said, the one with a brown bear for an eraser. The principal assured him that he wouldn't need it in outer space, and the custodian noted that the request was moot; the boy's desk had been emptied earlier that day. So they closed the cover. All we could see was the smudge of the boy's face pressed against the porthole.

When the rocket blasted off, it made us all take an involuntary step backwards, the light of the flames illuminating the wonder upon our children's faces. We watched as the capsule rose from our playground, leaving behind our swing sets and jungle gym, rising higher, until it was but a sparkling marble in the night sky, and then, finally, gone completely. We sighed with awe, some applauded, and then we made our rounds, wishing one another goodnight, arranging play dates, and returning to our cars. Those of us on the PTO remained to put the gymnasium back in order for the coming morning. And the boy faded from our thoughts, replaced by the lateness of the evening and the pressure of delayed bedtime schedules. I myself had all but forgotten about the child by the time I lay our sleeping daughter on her bed. And yet, when I took out the recycling that night, I paused beneath the streetlamps of our cul-de-sac and thought of the children up there. I imagined all of them drifting alone, speaking into their microphones, telling us about their lives from the depths of the unknown.