

PART I

Dream

“His adventure began with a
dream . . . Robert Goddard had a waking
dream about flying farther than anyone ever
had, to other worlds in the sky.”

David A. Clary
Rocket Man



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Imagine It

If you could not fail, what would you attempt?

Forget about your fears, the facts, looking silly or stupid—and test your ability to dream.

Albert Einstein said that imagination is more important than knowledge. Why would he say something so contrary to his pursuit of scientific truth? To free his imagination. To suspend his fear of being wrong—for a while—and to dream how the universe might be.

What would you dream?

Rocket scientists have their answer. Rocket scientists love science fiction novels and movies: stories about traveling to Mars, Jupiter, Alpha Centauri, the Andromeda Galaxy; about contact with alien beings, many-tentacled monsters, conscious robots, and giant ants (or spiders or locusts or gorillas). Their favorite books are not literature. Their favorite films are the exemplars of B-grade movies. So what does this demonstrate about rocket scientists?

They aren't afraid of looking silly.

How can a rocket scientist who has remotely piloted a deep space probe to the outer fringes of the solar system enjoy the 1950 film *Destination Moon*, which tenders a juvenile plot, serves up wooden dialogue, and features cheesy special effects?

Let's take a closer look at a group of such rocket scientists who worked for a prestigious government laboratory. On a regular basis, they would meet for a "Sci-Fi Film Festival" in which they'd watch 1950s videos. They'd watch such classics as *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and *Forbidden Planet* and such crap as *Plan 9 From Outer Space* and *I Married A Monster From Outer Space*. They memorized lines

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like “Gort, Klaatu barada nikto!” (what to say to the robot to stop him from vaporizing you) and “The fool—to think that his ape-brain could contain the secrets of the Krell!” (what Dr. Morbius said to the rescue ship’s doctor who took the IQ boost). They’d laugh at the bad navigation in *Rocketship X-M* where the spacecraft “accidentally” goes to Mars instead of the moon.

But they loved these films.

They were like children who want to hear the same fairy tale over and over again. These were the fairy tales of the rocket scientists; their unfettered hearts seeking contact with outer space. Their logic turned off (their humor kept on)—their dreams turned on.

Imagination wasn’t silly to them.

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Scientist

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