

"OCTOBER SKY."

~~THE ROCKET BOYS~~

by

Lewis Colick

Based on the book

by

Homer Hickham

REVISED

March 20, 1997

"It won't fly unless somebody lights the fuse."

Homer Hickham

This story is true.

FADE IN:

EXT. OUTER SPACE - NIGHT

WE SEE the distant planets, moons and twinkling stars that dot the galaxy. WE HEAR the RADIO ANNOUNCER'S AWE FILLED VOICE:

ANNOUNCER ONE (V.O.)

...Yes, I can hear it. We're definitely picking up its signal. Listen now for the sound which forever more separates the old from the new...

After a moment of silence, WE HEAR a slow and steady...BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! Then - WHOOSH! A small silver satellite appears out of nowhere and streaks across the galaxy. WE FOLLOW IT FOR AWHILE. WE HEAR overlapping radio announcers:

ANNOUNCER TWO (V.O.)

...we have confirmed that yesterday on the fourth of October, 1957, the Russians successfully launched history's first man-made satellite into orbit around the earth.

ANNOUNCER THREE (V.O.)

Sputnik is being hailed as a milestone in history, a giant step toward the conquest of interplanetary space, a-

ANNOUNCER FOUR (V.O.)

A grim new chapter in the cold war. And while some of President Eisenhower's advisors are downplaying Sputnik's significance, none could deny that-

Suddenly, the sound of the radio dial, seeking a new station. Then...Elvis?

RADIO

"Warden threw a party in the county jail. Prison band was there and they began to wail...etc."

As "Jailhouse Rock" continues, Sputnik speeds OUT OF FRAME, AND CAMERA PANS DOWN TO:

EXT. COALWOOD, WEST VIRGINIA - DAY

A tiny, bleak and weather-beaten mining town. The towering black tippie that marks the mine entrance looms oppressively over the town. The coal train is rumbling through the heart of town, shaking the wooden buildings, spraying a filthy mist of coal dust over buildings and citizens alike. Nobody even notices. A rusted '49 Buick is backfiring and smoking as it drives through the town.

INT. ROY LEE'S CAR - DAY

Three boys are in the car. Behind the wheel is Elvis clone, ROY LEE, O'DELL, a smallish kid with a pronounced limp due to a childhood bout with polio, and HOMER HICKHAM. Homer, a good-looking, skinny kid is wearing a ragged football jersey that's way too big for him.

HOMER

Step on it, will you, Roy Lee?

ROY LEE

You sure are in a hurry to go get yourself killed.

O'DELL

No, shit. Homer, you're dreaming if you think you're gonna make the football team...

HOMER

(determined)

Only way out of this town is on a football scholarship. Always has been.

O'DELL

(kidding, of course)

Why would anybody want to leave Coalwood?

HOMER

It's almost eight. Will you step on it, please?

ROY LEE

I am stepping on it...

The slow moving car goes BANG! POP! BANG!

EXT. THE CAR

As it heads out of town, WE SEE the rugged terrain surrounded by the rolling green hills of West Virginia. WE HEAR:

ROY LEE (V.O.)
I'm telling you, Homer, you're
gonna get killed.

ON SCREEN TITLE - COALWOOD, WEST VIRGINIA, 1957

EXT. BIG CREEK HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL FIELD - DAY

Football tryouts are in session. Barrel-chested COACH GAINER shouts at Homer, who is dwarfed by the other players:

GAINER
Okay, Hickham, let's see what you
got.

If Homer's scared, and he's got every right to be, he's not letting on as he puts on his helmet and trots off to take his place on the line of scrimmage. Roy Lee and O'Dell shake their heads from the sidelines.

ANGLE - VARSITY PLAYERS

These kids are enormous. One of them is Homer's brother, JIM HICKHAM. He glances across the field at Homer, catches his eye. Homer nods. Then Jim says to his buddy, a giant lineman:

JIM
Take it easy on my kid brother.
Make him look good.

The buddy nods, takes his place on the defensive line. The quarterback calls the play. The center snaps him the ball. The two scrimmage lines throw themselves at each other in desperate, growling combat. From the side-lines, Coach Gainer shouts:

COACH
Smash him! Smash him! Atta boy!

Homer on tight and doesn't get more than a step before the big lineman runs over him like a truck. Homer is flat on his back.

On the bench, Roy Lee and O'Dell wince, and on the field Jim Hickham barks at his buddy:

JIM
I told you to take it easy on him.

BUDDY
(he means this)
I did take it easy on him.

Homer resumes his position. He locks eyes with the defensive tackle.

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HOMER

I'm gonna run right over you, you
sonavabitch...you hearing me?

Once again Homer gets flattened.

SERIES OF THREE PLAYS

In each play, Homer gets run over. The punishment he's taking is brutal. Roy Lee and O'Dell, sitting on the bench, can't even watch. Neither can Homer's brother. But each time he gets knocked down, Homer gets back on his feet and gamely returns to his place on the scrimmage line. Until the third and final play. Coach Gainer walks over and pulls him to his feet.

COACH

You got guts, Homer, but these
guys are kinda big and you're
kinda small. You gotta know when
to quit.

Homer doesn't know when to quit, but he does know that there's
no use in arguing.

EXT. COALWOOD - DAY

The three boys are pushing Roy Lee's broken down car down the
street. Homer is bruised, bloody and dispirited.

HOMER

It's not fair. Why should the
damned jocks be the only ones who
get scholarships?

O'DELL

(commiserating)

They also get the only girls in
this town worth looking at. That's
the thing burns my ass...

HOMER

There's a whole world out there
that we're never gonna get to see,
or know anything about...

The exhausted boys come to a stop in front of the huge COMPANY
STORE which is smack in the middle of the town square. A half
dozen grizzled-looking men, loiter on the steps, drinking beer
and chewing tobacco. One of them, POOKIE WILSON, smirks at the
exhausted boys.

POOKIE

Bought yourself a real lemon
there, didn't you, Roy Lee?

ROY LEE
Smart as a tack, ain't you,
Pookie?

Store manager, MR. DANTZLER steps outside and speaks to the miners.

MR. DANTZLER
I hate to be a hard ass, but I've
asked you boys before not to
loiter here and-

MINER
Save your breath, Dantzler...

The men begin to move off the steps. The boys follow Dantzler into the store.

INT. COMPANY STORE - DAY

In a mining town like Coalwood, the company store is more than just a store, it's a meeting hall of sorts where townsfolk gossip and exchange information. Homer, O'Dell and Roy Lee are grabbing Cokes as Dantzler remarks to customer IKE BYKOVSKI, a polish Jew and a giant of a man.

DANTZLER
There's more and more of the poor
bastards drifting into town every
day. There's just not enough work
to go around anymore.

Homer approaches with his money for a magazine and soda.

HOMER
Hi, Mr. Bykovski. Here you go,
Mr. Dantzler.

Bykovski notices what a mess Homer is.

BYKOVSKI
Homer, are you all right?

HOMER
Yeah, I'm all right.

BYKOVSKI
Because you look like you were
run over by a truck.

O'DELL
(snickering)
It wasn't any truck. It was a
defensive tackle.

BYKOVSKI

So what do you boys think about
this?

Bykovski holds up a newspaper. THE HEADLINE screams Soviet's
Launch Sputnik - First Man-made Satellite.

BYKVOSKI

The sonavabitches actually beat
us up there. Isn't that something?

The kids just shrug.

ROY LEE

I say let 'em have outer space.
We've got Elvis.

DANTZLER

I'm with you. What with the
foreign countries building their
own steel mills, we've got enough
to worry about down here.

(to Homer)

You haven't heard anything about
lay-offs, have you, Homer?

HOMER

(glancing through
magazine)

Why would I hear anything?

DANTZLER

(irritated)

Your father's the mine
superintendent, isn't he?

HOMER

Yeah...

DANTZLER

Don't the two of you ever have
occasion to talk to each other?

HOMER

Course we do.

(then)

Some...

Dantzler looks confused.

INT. THE MINE - DAY

An army of grime-covered miners with lighted helmets go about
the dangerous business of digging out the deep, rich bituminous
coal. The noise is deafening as the gigantic loading machine
tears at the wall with its great steel teeth.

At the center of all the activity is a big man with a commanding presence and a booming voice - mine superintendent, JOHN HICKHAM, Homer's father. He's shouting his orders to JAKE MOSBY, his foreman.

JOHN
I want tunnels 23, 36 and 42
checked for methane, and put some
men to work on these roof bolts
in the morning.

MOSBY
We usually dust on Friday.

JOHN
We'll dust on Saturday.

Mosby rushes off. John Hickham coughs violently. Spits into a handkerchief. Then shouts to the loading machine operator:

JOHN
Two more days on that block and
we're gonna be down to the bone.
I guess that's not too...

Hickham has noticed something. Something he doesn't like. He starts walking quickly toward-

A MINER WITH A PICK AXE

He's working the wall about twenty yards away. What John Hickham sees and the miner doesn't is that the slate roof above him is about to give way. Hickham shouts:

JOHN
Jensen!

But it's too noisy to hear. John is running now, pushing miners out of his way. He shouts again:

JOHN
Jensen, look out!

Jensen turns. Too late. The roof is coming down. The miners shout and scatter as John Hickham, risking his life, barrels into Jensen, knocking him clear of the falling debris in the nick of time. But Jensen's head strikes a rock, and he cracks his skull.

EXT. MINE ENTRANCE - DAY

The place is ringed with on-lookers including Homer, O'Dell and Roy Lee, who have just arrived. John Hickham is holding the unconscious Jensen, patting his face as the other miners stand around.

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JOHN

Come on, Jensen, come on back...

Jensen opens his eyes.

JENSEN

What...what happened?

Sighs of relief all around. Foreman Mosby speaks up.

MOSBY

I'll tell you what happened...the whole damned roof almost came down on your head, and John here saved your life.

The small crowd reacts. Homer beams proudly. Says to his pals:

HOMER

That's my dad...

JENSEN

Thanks, John, I-

JOHN

(barking)

You're suspended, you stupid sonavabitch.

John Hickham's harsh tone stuns everybody.

JENSEN

Huh..?

JOHN

That area was your responsibility. We all could have been killed down there because you didn't have enough common sense to look up.

The miner's goodwill toward John Hickham for saving Jensen has thoroughly evaporated. Homer stands there mortified.

HOMER

That's my dad...

Now John Hickham spots Homer standing on the edge of the crowd.

JOHN

Homer!

Homer quakes in his father's presence.

HOMER

Yes, sir?

JOHN
What the hell happened to you?

HOMER
I just got a little roughed up
trying out for the football team.

Homer's answer takes his father by surprise.

JOHN
You're way too scrawny for high
school ball. What were you
thinking?

To Homer's chagrin, O'Dell pipes up:

O'DELL
He was thinking that he was gonna
win himself a football
scholarship.

HOMER
Shut up, O'Dell...

Jake Mosby chortles.

MOSBY
What's the matter, Homer? You
ain't cut out-for mining coal?
Me neither.

Other miners chuckle, but not John Hickham. He's annoyed.

JOHN
(barks at miners)
Let's get that mess cleaned up.

The miserable miners follow John back to the tippie. Jake Mosby
laughs at Homer before he goes:

MOSBY
Buck up, Homer, you're a Coalwood
boy. Minute you get that coal
shovel in your hands, it's gonna
feel as natural to you as a tic
on a dog.

Homer smiles good naturedly, but as he watches the miners
trudging back toward the mine, a chill goes up his spine.

INT. MISS RILEY'S CLASSROOM - DAY

Science teacher FREIDA RILEY is in her late twenties, and quite
pretty. Her eyes sparkle with all the possibilities of life and
she takes being a teacher extremely seriously. From the portable
radio that's sitting on her desk comes a barely audible BEEP!

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! The kids just sit there.

ROY LEE
That's it? That's Sputnik?

MISS RILEY
That's Sputnik.

ANOTHER KID
Doesn't sound all that impressive
to me.

Suddenly QUENTIN WILSON leaps up in great agitation. Quentin's an odd-looking kid with ill-fitting clothes and no social grace. Too smart for his own good. He's practically shouting:

QUENTIN
Don't you understand that this
sound you're hearing is being
transmitted from an object that
is traveling at one thousand miles
per hour, five hundred and
fifty-nine miles above the earth?

The kids in the class can't stand Quentin, and they shout for him to sit down and shut up. Some pelt him with pens, crumbled paper, etc. Miss Riley holds up her hands for order.

MISS RILEY
Okay, knock it off.
(then)
I have to agree with Quentin.
Kids, Sputnik is definitely a
milestone in history, and make
no mistake about it...nothing's
ever going to be the same again.

As the kids weigh her words, Miss Riley observes Homer staring with puppy dog eyes across the room at DORIS PLOSS, a pretty sixteen-year-old.

MISS RILEY
Wouldn't you agree, Homer?

HOMER
Huh?

The class laughs. Miss Riley approaches him.

MISS RILEY
Russian students pay attention
to their teachers.
(smiles at Homer)
If they didn't, they'd be
executed.

Homer smiles. Though Miss Riley sometimes pushes him, they are pals.

EXT. THE HICKHAM HOUSE - NIGHT

About twenty people have gathered in the front yard of this two-story, barn-like dwelling, and they're all scanning the heavens. Homer's mother ELSIE is among them. Elsie Hickham's in her early forties. Her youthful beauty's been worn away too soon.

ELSIE

This Sputnik better show up soon.
My neck's starting to stiffen.

NEIGHBOR LADY

Maybe the paper got the day wrong.

ANOTHER NEIGHBOR

Or maybe this whole thing's just
some hoax the Russians cooked up
to scare us dumb Americans...

ANGLE - THE PORCH

Homer and O'Dell listen intently to Roy Lee's story.

O'DELL

You're full of shit, Roy Lee.
Who'd you ever go all the way
with?

Roy Lee smiles slyly as he sings:

ROY LEE

"It's not for me to say..."

O'DELL

Roy Lee-

ROY LEE

Valentine Carmina.

HOMER AND O'DELL

No! For real?

ROY LEE

I remember every song the radio
played while we were doing it.
First was the Everly Brothers.

(sings)

"Wake up, little Suzie." Wake up.
Then came...

(sing)

"Darling, you-who-who-who- send
me." Followed by-

John Hickham steps out onto the porch. Roy Lee and O'Dell leap up respectfully. John sees the people gathered by the fence.

JOHN
What's going on?

HOMER
Everybody's waiting to see
Sputnik. Paper says it's supposed
to be visible over the eastern
seaboard tonight.

John shakes his head disdainfully as he walks over to his wife.

JOHN
Elsie, I just got a call. There's-

ELSIE
(wearily)
Another ventilation problem.

JOHN
I'll try to be back before
morning.

Elsie Hickham watches her husband as he heads off toward the mine, just a few hundred yards away. She's watched him go a thousand times. She still doesn't like it.

BACK TO HOMER AND THE GUYS

Roy Lee still singing:

ROY LEE
Followed by, " Shake, rattle and
Roll." I said, "shake, rattle and-

Suddenly O'Dell points to the sky and shouts:

O'DELL
I think I see it.

ROY LEE
You're seeing things, O'Dell...

HOMER
I can see it. Look, right there.
It's Sputnik!

Now everybody sees it. A neighbor exclaims:

NEIGHBOR
Well, I'll be damned...

SPUTNIK STREAKING ACROSS THE SKY

For Homer Hickham all time stands still as he watches the bright, little ball streaking inexorably across the starry sky with what seems to be solemn and dangerous purpose. Homer's whole face appears lit from within as if by the light of Sputnik.

And then Sputnik is gone. O'Dell, Roy Lee and the neighbors start drifting off, murmuring comments ranging from, "Wasn't that something?" to "I could hardly see it."

But Homer remains alone, rooted to the spot. Unable, unwilling to move. There is only one word to describe what he's feeling right now, and he's not even aware that he's speaking it.

HOMER

Wow...

INT. HICKHAM KITCHEN - DAY

Though the meager furnishings obviously belong to a family that is barely making ends meet, everything in here is clean and orderly. Still as good a housekeeper as she is, not even Elsie Hickham can keep out the fine layer of black coal dust WE SEE settled on the shelves and window sills. So it is in every Coalwood home.

The family is having breakfast. As John speaks to Jim, it's clear that Jim's the apple of his old man's eye. Homer just sits there with a faraway expression on his face.

JOHN

The first game against Welch...that's the one that's gonna draw the scouts.

JIM

I guess, they like to see the blood flow much as anybody.

ELSIE

You just be careful, Jim. Last year two Welch boys got their arms broken and-

JOHN

They started it.

ELSIE

Don't matter much who started it. I don't call that football.

(then)

John, I've been cutting back best I can, but the grocery money's just about gone and-

JOHN

Jesus, Elsie...You're gonna have
to do better. Everybody around
here's gonna have to do better.

Then from out of the blue, Homer announces:

HOMER

I'm gonna build a rocket.

The conversation stops as everybody just looks at Homer,
especially his father.

HOMER

(animated)

Like Sputnik. I'm not saying I'm
gonna get it into space or
anything, but I'm gonna do it.
I'm gonna build a rocket.

Nobody says a word. Until finally Elsie says simply:

ELSIE

Well, don't blow yourself up.

Jim snickers, and John Hickham shakes his head.

ELSIE

More eggs anybody?

EXT. HICKHAM HOUSE - DAY

Homer, Roy Lee and O'Dell are in the yard, clustered around
something we can't yet see.

ROY LEE

Nice rocket...

O'DELL

How high do you think it'll fly?

Now WE SEE the rocket, sitting atop the fence. It's nothing more
than a de-winged model airplane with a plastic flashlight all
wrapped up in electrical tape glued inside its fuselage. The
flashlight's got a hole punched through its base for the fuse.

HOMER

I've got it packed with the powder
from thirty cherry bombs. I'd say
three miles, maybe four.

Homer produces a book of matches and lights the fuse. The
excited boys stand back and count down:

BOYS

Ten, nine, eight, seven, six,
five, four, three, two, ONE!

LIFTOFF is a huge ball of fire, accompanied by a thunderous BOOM! But it isn't the rocket that lifts off. It's the fence. Wooden splinters whistle past the startled boys' ears as larger debris arcs into the sky, falling with a clatter.

Frightened neighbors stream out of their houses. Dogs all over the neighborhood are howling their heads off. As Elsie Hickham comes charging out of the house, Roy Lee and O'Dell run off.

ELSIE

What happened?

HOMER

My rocket...

ELSIE

Are you okay?

HOMER

I guess...

ELSIE

My heart is pounding. I thought
the mine blew up...

(then)

Oh, Homer...no...

Elsie has just seen the smoking disaster area that used to be her fence.

ELSIE

I waited six months for the
company carpenter to finally get
around to putting up that fence.

HOMER

(trying for humor)

It's better than the mine
exploding.

(off his mother's look)

I'll put it back together again.
Somehow...

Then Elsie Hickham sighs wearily:

ELSIE

Didn't I tell you not to blow
yourself up?

HOMER

Yes, ma'am.

ELSIE
(gently)
Then let's not.

Homer smiles meekly.

EXT. FOOTBALL STADIUM - DAY

Homer, O'Dell and Roy Lee are among the crowd filing into the football stadium. A pair of TEENS spot them and they call out mockingly:

TEEN ONE
Hey, look, it's the rocket boys!

TEEN TWO
The Russians launch Sputnik and
these jokers launch fence-nik.

The teens go off laughing. Homer and the guys squirm.

ROY LEE
Up yours, Rodney.

HOMER
(muttering)
Rocket boys...

EXT. HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL FIELD - DAY

Aside from the kids, the stands are packed with rough and ready coal miners and their wives, who take their high school football very seriously. Today's game between notorious rivals Big Creek and Welch is the one they've all been waiting for. Most vocal among the shouting fans is John Hickham, sitting up front with Elsie.

ON THE FIELD

As their scrimmage lines collide, it's obvious that these two teams are out for blood. Tight end Jim Hickham's about to reel in a long pass when the big Welch linebacker elbows him in the ribs and sends him hurtling into the stands. Elsie Hickham shrieks:

ELSIE
Jim!

John Hickham roughly grabs the passing ref.

JOHN
That's pass interference, you
sonavabitch.

As the angry miners help Jim up, John Hickham commands:

JOHN
Don't let him get away with that.
Kill that bastard.

JIM
Okay, dad...

And Jim Hickham charges out of the stands toward the linebacker.

JIM
I'm gonna bust your ass.

Coach Gainer rushes out and restrains Jim. The Big Creek fans go wild. So do the Welch fans.

Homer and his pals are shouting just as loud as anybody.

O'DELL
Welch is going to keep hammering
your brother, it's the only chance
they've got.

HOMER
Jim'll break through.

ROY LEE
Ah...my favorite part of the game.

ON THE FIELD

As the refs try to get the game going, the cheerleaders, led by the lovely Doris Ploss cheer:

CHEERLEADERS
On, on Green and White, we are
ripe for the fight tonight. Hold
that ball and hit that line, every
Big Creek star will shine...

Homer can't take his eyes off Doris. Homer's teacher, Miss Riley comes by.

MISS RILEY
I heard you blew your fence up.

HOMER
You and everybody else in town.

Homer hasn't taken his eyes off of Doris. Miss Riley smiles.

MISS RILEY
Instead of just daydreaming all
the time, why don't you do
something about it?

HOMER
Cheerleader's only go out with
football players.

MISS RILEY
Don't sell yourself short, Homer.

Then she moves off through the stands, shouting:

MISS RILEY
Come on, Big Creek, kick some ass!

Homer has to smile as he watches her go.

ON THE FIELD

Jim and the team are in a huddle. The quarterback pleads:

QUARTERBACK
But they're gonna crush you.

JIM
(snarling)
Every scout in the state is here.
I want the goddamned ball.

QUARTERBACK
On two!

They break. The two lines face each other. The tension on the field and in the stands is palpable. The play is called. Jim goes out for the pass. The defensive linebacker is right on his ass and the ball is in the air. Jim elbows the linebacker right in the throat then he leaps for the ball. And just manages to snag it.

Homer, John Hickham and all the rest of the die-hard Big Creek fans go berserk as Jim runs it into the end zone. But then a penalty flag goes down and the ref is waving his arms. The touchdown doesn't count. Welch fans cheer, but the groan that goes up from the Big Creek side is deafening. Jim Hickham throws the ball down disgustedly. Then, without warning, Jim is charged by the linebacker he'd elbowed in the throat.

LINEBACKER
Come on, fucker, you and me.

The tackle punches Jim in the face and all hell breaks loose.

Both benches empty as the two teams charge each other. Jim and the tackle are beating the shit out of each other.

A bunch of the miners storm the field. The Refs try to hold them back.

The punches are flying and so are the beer bottles. What began as a football game is quickly turning into a riot.

ON HOMER AND HIS PALS

Fighting their way through the crowd, surging down onto the field, but it's a losing battle. They are quickly separated. Homer finds himself out on the field. He's getting pushed around, jostled, utter chaos. Then A BIG MAN, obviously a Welch fan, grabs him roughly and spins him around.

MAN

I'm gonna bite your fucking ears off.

Homer struggles to get free, but this big goon's twice his size. The man moves in with his jagged teeth. Then WHAM! A powerful fist smashes into those jagged teeth. The man is sent staggering backward. Homer finds himself being whisked through the crowd to safety by his father.

JOHN

You okay?

HOMER

Yeah...

John deposits Homer on the ramp leading out.

JOHN

Go on home, Homer. Before you get hurt.

Though glad to be alive, Homer is slightly embarrassed at having to be rescued by his dad, and as he watches his brawny father charge onto the field to do battle alongside Jim, he believes in his heart that he'll never be the man his father is.

INT. HIGH SCHOOL AUDITORIUM - DAY

The place is packed with concerned students, Homer among them. All eyes are on PRINCIPAL TURNER, a tall, thin man with a perpetual scowl and a formal air.

TURNER

The news that I have is grave. It comes from the school board which has just informed me...that they are placing our football team on immediate suspension.

The collective gasp is audible. Miss Riley shakes her head. Coach Gainer looks stricken as he stands up.

COACH

How long of a suspension?

TURNER

The suspension will last for the remainder of season.

The crowd can't believe it. They shout, "It isn't fair, " etc. Principal Turner holds up his hands for silence. The football players look suicidal.

INT. SCHOOL CORRIDOR - DAY

Homer's walking down the hall. He sees his brother, Jim, pulling some books out of his locker. Jim looks absolutely miserable. Homer walks over.

HOMER

Jim...? Jim, I'm sorry. It isn't fair. They shouldn't-

JIM

(scowling)

This is my senior year. My last chance to show those college scouts what I can do. Now I'll never get a scholarship.

HOMER

Jim-

JIM

(bitterly)

Now I'm gonna end up in the damned coal mines just like you and all the rest of 'em.

Then Jim punches his metal locker door so hard the sound reverberates through the halls. Then Jim storms off. Homer just stands there, now feeling as badly as his brother does.

INT. HOMER'S ROOM - NIGHT

Homer's at his desk struggling with his Trigonometry homework. He can't make heads of tails of it. The radio plays in the background. Then:

RADIO ANNOUNCER (V.O.)

...today the Army Ballistic Missile Agency, led by Dr. Wernher von Braun, finally got the United States into space with the successful launch of their Explorer satellite aboard a Jupiter-C rocket...

Homer listens with rapt attention. He murmurs:

HOMER

Way to go. We're in the race.

Then Homer has an idea. He swoops aside his Trig homework and begins to write a letter.

HOMER (V.O.)

Dear Mr. von Braun, my name is Homer Hickham, I'm sixteen, and I live in a small mining town in West Virginia I'm sure you probably never heard of called Coalwood. I'm writing to congratulate you and your team on your great achievement. I have no doubt whatsoever that thanks to your efforts, we're going to beat the damned...the Soviets to the moon. A few weeks ago, I tried unsuccessfully to launch my own small rocket. Since, here in Coalwood, everybody's much more interested in what's down below the earth than in what's above it, there isn't a whole lot of material to be found on the subject of rocketry. So I've been kind of stumbling around in the dark...

INT. MALT SHOP - DAY

Big Creek High kids dance to Elvis on the juke box. Roy Lee, O'Dell and Homer sit in a booth. Homer is staring at Quentin Wilson, the geeky smart kid, sitting alone in a booth with a coke and some school books.

ROY LEE

Quentin's such a geek even the other geeks won't have anything to do with him.

ROY LEE

Seriously, Homer, if you want to preserve what little social life you got left, you'll forget about Quentin Wilson and forget about rockets.

VALENTINE CARMINA, a sexy, dark haired girl dances nearby. O'Dell leaps up.

O'DELL

You know, Valentine, it's a proven fact that guys who limp, develop more natural rhythm. And look, see, I can do that Elvis thing, real easy.

O'Dell twirls his leg around like Elvis. Roy Lee and Valentine laugh. But Homer's still focused on Quentin. Finally he makes his move. As Roy Lee watches with dismay, Homer heads stealthily toward Quentin's booth. He just hovers there, trying to appear inconspicuous. Finally Quentin glances up.

QUENTIN

Leave me alone, Homer. I'm not bothering you.

Homer, afraid to be seen speaking with Quentin, doesn't even look at him as he responds.

HOMER

Who said, you were?
(then)
Do you know anything about rockets?

QUENTIN

(dumb question)
Of course, I do.

Homer lights up. He's about to sit down, but he stops himself, aware of the other kids, who seem to be watching.

HOMER

You want to go over to the library?

Quentin just looks at him.

QUENTIN

No.

A couple of kids show up. One shoots Quentin with a spitball, the other says laughingly to Homer:

KID ONE

Hey, Homer what's with you and Pizza Face?

KID TWO

Since when are you two pals?

Other kids are watching. Homer's moment of truth.

HOMER

Quentin and I were having an intelligent conversation. Why don't you two clowns take a hike?

KID ONE

What..?

He slides into the booth alongside Quentin, startling the two kids as well as Quentin.

HOMER

And by the way, Roger, if I had your face, I wouldn't be making cracks. Hell, it looks like somebody started a fire on your face and put it out with an ice pick.

The nearby kids laugh at Roger, who slinks off with his friend. Quentin studies Homer for a moment. Then:

QUENTIN

What do you want to know about rockets?

HOMER

(excited)

Everything.

QUENTIN

Well, rocketry was actually invented by the Chinese as early as 1000.A.D. Supposedly they were quite sophisticated and...

HOMER

Quentin...when I said I wanted to know everything, I didn't really mean, everything.

Then to the boys' surprise, who should suddenly sit down beside them but Valentine Carmina and another pretty girl.

VALENTINE

We heard you're building rockets. Are you?

GIRLFRIEND

Sputnik was pretty cool, but we're gonna beat those Russians yet. Don't you think so, Homer?

Homer is surprised and delighted.

HOMER

No doubt about it, and actually,
girls, I am building rockets.

(arm around Quentin)

We both are. Right, Quentin?

Before the nervous Quentin can reply, Roy Lee and O'Dell rush over, tripping all over themselves to impress the girls.

ROY LEE

Actually we're all building
rockets together. I love rockets.

O'DELL

Especially the way they go up into
space and everything...

The girls giggle. Quentin shakes his head. Homer smiles.

INT. ROY LEE'S CAR - DAY

The boys are looking over Quentin's "Popular Science" magazine with an article containing instructions for amateur rocket builders.

HOMER

(re: the magazine)

Potassium nitrate and sulphur...

QUENTIN

What did you use for fuel?

HOMER

(embarrassed)

I used...forget it...

(back to magazine)

Quentin, this is great...it's got
diagrams, formulas, everything
we need.

ROY LEE

I don't get it...

QUENTIN

I know what you mean. Some of the
formulas are quite advanced.

(points to a formula)

That's chemistry, which we haven't
had yet, and this equation is
physics and-

ROY LEE

No. What I mean is, who ever
figured that chicks liked rockets?

O'DELL
It's a whole new world...

HOMER
Drive to my house, Roy Lee. We
can use my basement.

Roy Lee turns the key. The car won't start. He tries again.

ROY LEE
Damn...

QUENTIN
Last year I built my own internal
combustion engine and entered it
in the county science fair.

ROY LEE
You wouldn't happen to have it
handy, would you?

He keeps trying to start the car.

MONTAGE - THE BOYS BUILD A ROCKET

Ike Turner's "Rocket 88" plays over the following scenes.

1. INT. HOMER'S BASEMENT. The entire basement has been turned into a make-shift rocket laboratory. The sink is filled with chemicals, and building supplies are scattered everywhere. Homer's going to work with a hacksaw on a four-foot long, inch-wide length of aluminum tubing. The boys are sawing two inches off a broom handle.
2. INT. BASEMENT. The boys are nailing the sawed off broom handle to the aluminum tubing. Homer's mother appears on the steps carrying a big load of wash. The boys don't see her. She realizes she can't do the wash without making the boys clear out of here. She turns around and carries the laundry back up.
3. INT. BASEMENT. The boys are gluing pieces of cardboard fins to the long metal tube, which now actually resembles a rocket.

ROY LEE
This is looking pretty good...

QUENTIN
What about this part...The nozzle?

Quentin is pointing to a diagram in the magazine.

ROY LEE
Uh-oh...that's gonna take a weld.

O'DELL
We don't know how to weld.

ROY LEE

Then let's forget the nozzle.

QUENTIN

The nozzle's the most important part.

(points to magazine)

The nozzle directs the flow of the hot gasses.

HOMER

(an idea)

Mr. Bykovski can do it. He works the hoot owl shift. I can go over there tonight.

O'DELL

Your father's not going to let Mr. Bykovski weld rockets for us on company time.

Homer's scared and determined at the same time.

HOMER

My father's not going to find out about it...

END MONTAGE

EXT. PATH TO THE MINE - NIGHT

A full moon and the constant hooting of an owl accompany the miners as they head up the path to the mines.

INT. HOMER'S ROOM - NIGHT

The clock says midnight. Homer pulls on his clothes.

INT. THE HALL - NIGHT

Rocket in hand, Homer walks stealthily out of his room, and makes his way silently down the steps, desperate to avoid his father at all costs. But then:

The downstairs lights go on. John Hickham appears from kitchen. He heads toward the den. Homer freezes on the stairs, flattens himself against the wall. His father passes right by him. Then Homer, breathing heavy, dashes through the kitchen, quietly opens the door and slips out of the house into the night.

INT. MACHINE SHOP - NIGHT

Rows of noisy lathes, mills, shapers, and drill presses are in operation. Homer stands near a lathe with Mr. Bykovski, who we met in the company store. Homer's holding his rocket.

BYKOVSKI

I don't think your father would like you sneaking up here in the middle of the night.

HOMER

Mr. Bykovski-

BYKOVSKI

And I know he would not like me welding for you on company time. I'm sorry, Homer.

HOMER

What if I paid the company for your time?

BYKOVSKI

What...?

HOMER

You know, like rent. How much would that cost?

BYKOVSKI

More than you have.

HOMER

I could sell something. I could sell my bike. I could-

BYKOVSKI

Why is this little rocket so important to you?

HOMER

I don't know. I just-

BYKOVSKI

You're willing to get in trouble with your father, maybe even cost me my job. What do you mean, you don't know?

HOMER

It's important to me because it's mine. Dad's got his coal mine and Jim's got football...

(sighs)

Look, Mr. Bykovski...maybe it's crazy, but when I'm working on my rockets, I feel like I'm working right alongside Dr. Von Braun and the rest of those guys down there at Cape Canaveral.

(more)

HOMER (Cont'd)
And then I feel like I'm part of
something bigger than Coalwood.
I feel like I'm part of this whole
wide world.

Homer's never expressed these thoughts before. Not even to himself. Bykovski stares at him. And then he smiles.

INT. HIGH SCHOOL CAFETERIA - DAY

Tables filled with kids, eating their lunches. Homer and the guys are looking over their now completed rocket.

HOMER
See? He used a washer for the
weld. It looks just like the
picture.

QUENTIN
Prodigious.

O'DELL
So when do we go?

Principal Turner is passing by with Miss Riley. He spots the rocket and plucks it off the table.

TURNER
A pipe bomb!

HOMER
It isn't a bomb, Principal Turner,
it's-

TURNER
It's a pipe bomb if ever I saw
one. Most likely there's a rule
against bringing a pipe bomb to
my school, Mr. Hickham, and if
there isn't, I shall make such
a rule here and now. Consider
this confiscated.

The flustered boys watch as Turner starts off with the rocket. Miss Riley heads him off.

MISS RILEY
Mr. Turner, that isn't a bomb.
It's a rocket.
(lying)
I asked Homer to bring it to
school to...

HOMER
To show it to the class.

The boys wait anxiously as Turner looks the rocket over. Then he hands it back to Homer with a disapproving look.

TURNER

Be very careful, gentlemen. I'm going to have my eye on you.

Principal Turner walks off.

HOMER

How come he's always gotta be such a-

MISS RILEY

Homer!

Homer checks himself. Then Miss Riley looks at the rocket.

MISS RILEY

You know, if you could actually get that thing to fly, you could enter it in next year's science fair.

Her comment is greeted with a chorus of negative reactions.

QUENTIN

That science fair is fixed. All the judges are from Welch so only the Welch kids ever win.

ROY LEE

Science fair's are for geeks. No offense, Quentin.

HOMER

We wouldn't be interested in that, Miss Riley.

MISS RILEY

That's too bad because the winners go on to compete in Indianapolis where every college in the country has got representatives handing out scholarships. Bye, boys.

She starts off. Homer's wheels are turning. He chases her.

HOMER

College Scholarships? For winning a science fair?

MISS RILEY

On second thought, that science fair's probably not for you. Forget I mentioned it.

HOMER

What do you mean? How come?

MISS RILEY

You limped through Algebra,
squeaked through Geometry and
let's not even discuss
Trigonometry.

HOMER

Yeah, but-

MISS RILEY

Nobody can just dream his way out
of Coalwood, Homer. Not even you.

She goes off. Homer weighs her words, knowing that she's right.

EXT. SMALL CLEARING - DAY

The rocket sits perched on a rock, it's nose cone pointing
confidently toward the sun. The boys stand silently regarding
it. Their moment of truth is at hand. Finally:

HOMER

Well, it won't fly unless somebody
lights the fuse...

And with that, he produces a book of matches. He lights the long
fuse and runs for it. He hunkers behind a rock with the others.

BOYS

Ten! Nine! Eight! Seven!

Homer dives for cover just as- A GREAT WHOOSHING NOISE IS HEARD.
Then Homer hears his friends cheering. He looks at them, follows
their pointing fingers to:

THE ROCKET - FIFTY FEET IN THE AIR

HOMER

Look at it go, we did it.

The boys cheer wildly. But then...

QUENTIN

Uh-oh...

ROY LEE

Holy shit! It's heading for the
mine.

Sure enough the rocket is arching over, heading down the
mountain straight for the mine area. The boys watch in horror.
Then Roy Lee and O'Dell take off running. Quentin grabs hold
of Homer, he's near tears:

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31.

QUENTIN

I told you we didn't know what
we were doing. I told you. I told
you.

Quentin takes off running. Homer just stands there. Frozen.

EXT. MINE AREA - DAY

A small group of miners are having their lunch. Then they see
this rocket heading toward them. One screams:

MINER

Mother of God! It's a guided
missile!

Here comes the rocket. Lunches go flying into the air as the
miners dive out for safety. The rocket continues on toward the
small brick building at the foot of the mine.

INT. MINE OFFICE - DAY

Homer's father is in serious discussion with some MINING COMPANY
OFFICIALS. One is a fat man named ANDERSON.

JOHN

Youngstown's always been fair.
But things have never been this
slow and-

ANDERSON

(nodding)
And the men would like to know
if we're considering lay-offs.
Well-

WHAM! The whole building is rocked by something crashing into
the outside wall. Everybody is stunned. They rush outside.

EXT. THE MINE OFFICE - DAY

John is fuming as he picks up the rocket which has taken quite a
chunk out of the wall. Then he sees Homer walking forlornly down
the hill toward him. A bevy of miners rush out of the mine,
wanting to know what's going on.

HOMER

Dad, it was-

JOHN

Be quiet! So this is what you've
been up to in the basement...

HOMER

Yes, sir.

JOHN
Goddamn it... You could have killed
somebody with this idiot thing.

Homer is mortified, being dressed down in front of the miners.

HOMER
I know that... I'm sorry.

Anderson laughs derisively.

ANDERSON
So your boy here wants to be a
rocket scientist, that it, John?

The other mine officials join in the laughter. Homer squirms.

JOHN
He has no idea what he wants to
be..
(glowering at Homer)
But I know what he is. He's a
goddamn menace. And he's a
thief.

Homer is stunned by this accusation.

HOMER
Dad...

His father points to the welded washer on the rocket.

JOHN
And so is whoever helped you. Ike
Bykovski gave you this, didn't
he?

John levels his steely gaze right at him, but Homer's not
talking. Finally:

JOHN
Go on home.

Homer turns and starts away.

JOHN
Homer!

Homer turns around. His father drops the rocket into the trash
bin.

JOHN
No more rockets on company
property.

Homer starts toward home.

EXT. HOMER'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Pouring rain. All of Homer's rocket building supplies have been put out on the porch where they're getting drenched.

INT. HOMER'S HOUSE - NIGHT

John Hickham sits in the den, poring over some mine blueprints. He coughs that violent cough that comes from deep within.

INT. KITCHEN - NIGHT

Homer's pacing around angrily while his mother sits placidly, painting a mural on the corner wall. It's a quiet beach scene with a bright sunny sky.

ELSIE

When I was a little girl my parents took me to Myrtle Beach, and I guess I've always dreamed of living there someday. Now I can't hardly even remember what Myrtle Beach looks like anymore.

HOMER

So you're painting it on the wall...

ELSIE

It's my wall.

HOMER

I can't believe he just dumped all my stuff out there like that. You've got to talk to him.

ELSIE

(shakes her head)

What with things slowing down at the mine and all, your father's got a lot on his mind.

HOMER

He called me a thief, mom. In front of everybody...How could he do that?

ELSIE

He was dead wrong calling you that.

HOMER

He'd never have done it to Jim.
Hell, they could catch Jim
sticking up the company store,
and dad would probably laugh and
say, "That's my boy."

Though Homer's being humorous, clearly he's in pain.

ELSIE

Oh, Homer...

HOMER

No matter how hard I try, no
matter what I do, he looks at me
like I'm a stranger. And he treats
me even worse.

ELSIE

He's a complicated man. But you
have to know he loves you. He-

HOMER

(bitterly)

He loves the mine. That's all.
More than Jim even. More than you.

Now Homer's gone to far.

ELSIE

Be quiet!

HOMER

(pressing)

He's the superintendent. He
doesn't have to work fourteen hour
days. He does it cause he loves
it.

Through walls comes John Hickham's loud, persistent cough.

HOMER

And what's it given him back?
Nothing but a black spot on his
lung the size of a damned quarter.

John Hickham walks into the room. He glowers at Homer.

JOHN

You don't know what the mine gives
me. You don't know cause you're
still a boy. But you'll find out
soon enough.

Homer doesn't respond. John heads for the fridge and pulls out a
bottle of milk. Elsie returns to her painting. Then:

HOMER
I'm never going down there.

Homer's just blurted this out, surprising even himself. His parents just look at him, then Elsie sighs:

ELSIE
Oh, Homer...of course, you are.

Homer storms out of the room. Elsie returns to her painting. John barks:

JOHN
You'd better have a talk with your son, Elsie, cause he's out of control, and I'm telling you here and now that-

Then Homer comes storming back in with a blanket. He's heading for the back door.

ELSIE
Where are you going with that blanket? Homer, it's pouring out there. Homer!

But he's gone. John shakes his head disgustedly.

JOHN
Out of control...

EXT. PORCH - NIGHT - CONT.

Homer begins covering up his rocket supplies with the blanket. Then he stares up into the black sky. The lightning flashes and the thunder booms. So does the heart of Homer Hickham.

EXT. A VACANT LOT - DAY

Homer's with O'Dell and Quentin, who are shaking their heads.

O'DELL
Homer, it was fun while it lasted, but-

HOMER
I'm not talking about doing it just for fun. We can win that science fair.

QUENTIN
I already told you, it's rigged.

Suddenly a gunshot. BLAM! The boys don't react.

HOMER

Just cause you didn't win,
Quentin, that doesn't mean it's
rigged.

BLAM. Another gunshot.

HOMER

(shouting)

Will you cut it out, Roy Lee?

Now WE SEE Roy Lee. He's holding a rifle. Taking deadly aim.

ROY LEE

Die you sonavabitch...

He pulls the trigger. WE SEE his target. It's his car. Riddled
with bullet holes. This latest one smashes into the hood.

O'DELL

Come on, Roy Lee, it's my turn.

Roy Lee is about to hand the rifle over to O'Dell, but Homer
takes it and flings it way out into the field.

ROY LEE

What's with you?

HOMER

We flew that rocket, must have
been at least thirty feet.

QUENTIN

More like fifty feet.

HOMER

Well, if we flew fifty feet we
can fly a mile. And if we can fly
a mile, then, boys, we can fly
all the way to Indianapolis.

ROY LEE

Didn't your dad say no more
rockets?

HOMER

(sly smile)

What he said was no more rockets
on company property.

Now the boys are really looking at him like he's crazy.

O'DELL

You have any idea how far we'd have to go to get off company property? The company owns everything far as the eye can see.

Homer was ready for this. He whips a small area map out of his pocket and points in all directions.

HOMER

We'd have to go thirty miles that way, twelve miles that way, eighteen miles that way...but only eight miles that way.

Homer points straight out of town.

QUENTIN

Only eight miles...And how are we supposed to get there, in that?

He points to Roy Lee's shot-up wreck of a car.

HOMER

We can hitch a ride, or walk if we have to.

O'DELL

You really are outta your skull.

ROY LEE

First you were gonna get yourself a football scholarship, now it's this foolishness...

HOMER

Roy Lee-

ROY LEE

It's like I'm always telling you, Homer, if the coal mines are good enough for our daddies, then they-

Homer's had enough of this. Now he goes on the attack.

HOMER

If it's good enough them, then how come your old man's one of the worst damned drunks in West Virginia?

(to Quentin)

And your old man...he loved the mines so much he went out for a tube of toothpaste ten years ago and no one's seen him since.

QUENTIN

(defensive)

He did not go out for toothpaste.
He stepped out for a chaw.

HOMER

Okay, Quentin...he stepped out
for a chaw. Look...

(he's almost pleading
now)

...You gotta know that the mine
will kill you. It'll kill you slow
like it's killing my dad...or
quick like it killed O'Dell's.

The boys react. Homer's going too far.

O'DELL

Shut up, Homer.

HOMER

You don't even know the whole
story about what happened to him,
do you, O'Dell? You were too young
so they spared you. But I know
it.

O'Dell's getting red in the face. Roy Lee can see it. But Homer
won't let up.

ROY LEE

Homer-

HOMER

When that roof came crashing down
a piece of slate caught him right
in the neck. It took his head
clean off.

O'Dell charges toward Homer. Roy Lee grabs hold of him. Homer
says with sadness:

HOMER

You boys want to be coal miners?
You all go ahead and be coal
miners...

Homer storms away.

EXT. HOMER'S HOUSE - DAY

Homer's on the porch, sorting out the rocket supplies, wondering
how he's going to get everything into his back pack. Then Roy
Lee, Quentin, and O'Dell show up.

O'DELL

God's honest truth, Homer. What are the chances of a bunch of Coalwood kids winning a national science fair? A thousand to one?

HOMER

God's honest truth? More like a million to one.

The boys exchange looks. Then O'Dell smiles.

O'DELL

Well, I guess a million to one's better than nothing.

Homer smiles as O'Dell throws down another backpack.

EXT. DIRT PATH - DAY

Miles out of town. The boys trudge up a steep dirt path. Loaded down with their backpacks and equipment, it's extremely tough going, especially for O'Dell with his withered leg. But when Homer tries to lend him a hand, O'Dell gamely waves him off.

HOMER

O'Dell? I shouldn't have told you that stuff about your dad.

O'DELL

It's okay. At least now I know.

QUENTIN

I've got blisters on my feet.

Roy Lee scoffs at Quentin's black, ankle high brogans.

ROY LEE

Those the only shoes you've got?

Quentin doesn't answer. In all likelihood, they are.

EXT. END OF THE ROAD - DAY

The exhausted, sweaty boys have come to the end of the road. They are looking out over something. Roy Lee, O'Dell and Quentin shake their heads with dismay.

QUENTIN

I can't believe we walked eight miles for this slack dump.

Now WE SEE what they do. Bulldozers have flattened millions of tons of coal tailings to create a black desert that stretches as far as they eye can see. No tree, not even a blade of grass grows here. It's what they call a slack dump.

But Homer's spirits are soaring as he says:

HOMER

We can build a blockhouse over there...and a launchpad...our rockets blasting off...I can see it all now, Cape Coalwood!

ROY LEE

Cape Coalwood..?

HOMER

We've got to plant a flag.

The boys laugh, but Homer's not kidding. He reaches out and yanks off the startled Quentin's scarf.

HOMER

A plaid flag? Thanks, Quentin.

Then Homer's off and running toward the ancient, wooden water tower that sits in the middle of the slack heap.

EXT. WATER TOWER - SHORT TIME LATER

O'Dell, Roy Lee and Quentin gaze nervously up the water tower which is a couple of hundred feet high.

ANGLE - HOMER - TOP OF THE TOWER

He finishes tying the scarf securely to the tower. The kids below applaud.

HOMER

You guys oughtta see the view from up here, you can see the whole valley.

QUENTIN

(nervously)

That's great, Homer, now get down from there, please...

To get down, Homer has to make his way across three rotted, creaky platforms that lead to a ladder. Homer makes his way gingerly across two of the platforms. One more to go. But as soon as he takes a step down onto the last platform, the board breaks beneath him and then the entire landing begins to collapse.

ON THE GROUND - THE BOYS SCREAM IN HORROR

Homer desperately leaps for a rickety wooden girder. He just makes it. He dangles hundreds of feet above the ground, hanging on for his life, and to make matters worse, the wind is really picking up.

Roy Lee and O'Dell start toward the ladder.

ROY LEE
Hang on, Homer.

HOMER
(calling down)
You won't be able to reach me.
Don't come up.

The frustrated, terrified boys can see that Homer's right.

O'DELL
What are you gonna do?

Homer's fighting panic. He tries to keep it light.

HOMER
Well...I guess, I'll just stay
up here for awhile. Like I said,
it's a pretty good view and-

CRACK! The wooden railing that Homer's hanging onto breaks. The boys below scream. Homer just manages to grab hold of the next wooden rail. He's exhausted now and scared to death.

ROY LEE
(to the others)
Come on!

The boys follow Roy Lee up the ladder. Homer's too scared and exhausted to argue. Roy Lee shouts up as he climbs:

ROY LEE
You gotta quit fooling around now,
Homer. Get moving. Come on, now!
Hand over hand! Do it, Homer, do
it, or you'll fall.

Homer takes a deep breath. Then he manages to reach out for the next rail. Then the next, easy does it, hand over hand.

Roy Lee's at the top of the ladder, O'Dell wraps his arms around his waist while Quentin holds O'Dell's legs.

ROY LEE
Keep on coming, Homer, attaboy...

Homer moves to the next rail. But then: CRACK! It collapses. Homer's going to fall. He lunges for Roy Lee's outstretched hand. And he just makes it. Roy Lee and the guys succeed in pulling Homer in. He grabs hold of the ladder.

HOMER
I thought I was a goner for sure.
You guys saved my life.

ROY LEE

Just don't start kissing us, okay?

Homer smiles. But kissing them is just what he feels like doing.

INT. HOMER'S ROOM - NIGHT

Homer's at his desk, writing a letter. WE HEAR:

HOMER (V.O.)

Dear Dr. Von Braun, Cape Coalwood
is coming along slowly but
surely...

HOMER'S VOICE OVER MONTAGE

1. CAPE COALWOOD. The boys are hard at work with picks and
shovels and saws and lumber.

HOMER

Thanks to O'Dell, who's turned
out to be a pretty great
scavenger, we've got plenty of
scrap lumber.

2. LUMBER YARD. Night. O'Dell is spiriting off some planks of
planks of lumber, while keeping a growling watch dog at bay with
a two by four.

3. CAPE COALWOOD. The boys are hard at work.

HOMER (V.O.)

We don't know where he got it,
and we're afraid to ask, but we
ought to have our blockhouse
finished up in a couple of weeks.

As he works, Roy Lee sings:

ROY LEE

I'm not the carpenter or the
carpenter's son, but I'll do the
carpentryin' until the carpenter
comes.

4. CAPE COALWOOD. Now the blockhouse is nearly completed. The
boys are installing a window.

HOMER (V.O.)

Our blockhouse is looking pretty
good. It's even got a plastic
viewing window that O'Dell says
he found in the trash behind the
Company Store... But we're not
so sure...

5. TRAIN YARD. In the signal man's bungalow, the confused signal man is just now discovering that there's no window in his window frame. He sticks his hand through it to make certain.

6. CAPE COALWOOD. The boys are having a serious discussion.

HOMER (V.O.)

Our biggest problem's turning out to be finding cement for our launch pad. Cement is expensive and a scarce commodity around Coalwood...

7. MINE ENTRANCE. Homer stands watching as his father comes up on the return lift. His eyes are like white marbles in his coal-caked abony face. He pulls out a red bandanna, now gray, and coughs into it.

HOMER (V.O.)

My father and I haven't spoken more than a couple of words to each other since the day our rocket crashed into his office, but the logical place to go for anything around here has always been the mine so I guess I have no choice...

John Hickham is surprised to see Homer. Homer is dreading this.

END MONTAGE

INT. MINE OFFICE - DAY

Homer's father's at his desk. Homer stands uncomfortably by the door, wishing he'd never come in here.

JOHN

The company doesn't have any extra cement. We figure out how much we need and that's what we order.

(pointed)

We don't have anything left over for launchpads.

HOMER

I just thought I'd-

JOHN

Besides, I told you no more rockets.

HOMER

You said, no more rockets on company property.

(more)

HOMER (Cont'd)
Mud Hollow's eight miles out of town, smack in the middle of nowhere.

JOHN
How are you getting out there?

HOMER
Sometimes we catch a ride. Mostly we walk.

JOHN
(surprised)
You walk eight miles?

HOMER
Yes, sir.

Homer can see that his father doesn't know what to make of him.

JOHN
Tell me something, Homer. What exactly is this Wernher von Braun and the rest of those Germans accomplishing anyway? If you ask me, it's nothing but a stunt.

HOMER
(disbelief)
You think that beating the Russians into space is a stunt?

JOHN
When the novelty wears off, they're all gonna be sent packing. Maybe then they'll have to find themselves some real jobs.

HOMER
(sarcastic)
You mean like mining coal?

It just slipped out and Homer is immediately sorry he said it. His father looks like he's going to burst a blood vessel.

JOHN
I know how you feel about getting your hands dirty, but the coal we mine makes steel, Homer.

HOMER
Dad-

JOHN
If steel fails this country fails,
and if you had a half a goddamned
brain in your head, you'd know
that...

Homer just stands there stricken. John stops himself. Sorry for
losing his temper. Then:

JOHN
I had a new engineer make an
estimate on a walkway, and they
had some cement left over. It got
rained on so I'm sure it's ruined,
but if you want to save the
company the expense of hauling
it out, it's all yours.

Homer, still reeling from his father's harsh words, is surprised
by this sudden turn of events. He can only mutter:

HOMER
Thanks...

John turns his attention to the work on his desk. Homer leaves
without another word.

EXT. CAPE COALWOOD - DAY

The excited boys are pouring cement.

ROY LEE
This cement's not ruined. Hell,
it's prime stuff.

QUENTIN
Your father must have made a
mistake.

Homer doesn't know what to think.

HOMER
Maybe...

Roy Lee sings as he works:

ROY LEE
"I'm not the concrete pourer or
the concrete pourer's son..."

The boys join in:

BOYS
"...but I'll do the concrete
pourin' until the concrete pourer
comes."

EXT. CAPE COALWOOD - DAY

Camera does a SLOW PAN of the now completed Cape Coalwood. WE SEE the boys standing on the ground, gazing proudly up at the flag flying in the breeze. The flag Quentin's plaid scarf embroidered now with a picture of a boy riding a rocket.

INT. MACHINE SHOP - NIGHT

Homer's got a rocket that needs a weld. He's looking around but the place is empty. Then a big man, MR. BOLT shows up.

HOMER

Mr. Bolt, have you seen Mr. Bykovski around?

BOLT

He's not up here anymore. Word is your father sent him down to the mine.

Homer is genuinely shocked.

EXT. THE MINE ENTRANCE - NIGHT

Homer walks alongside Bykovski, heading for the tippie with the rest of the miners.

HOMER

He's taking it out on you because you helped me...

BYKOVSKI

You're wrong. Your father did me a big favor transferring me from the machine shop.

HOMER

(surprised)

You mean you wanted to work in the mine?

BYKOVSKI

I can make twice as much money down there working the high coal. Homer, I've got relatives in Europe, who've had a hard time recovering from the war. This world you want so much to be a part of...it hasn't been so kind to them. They depend on me for whatever help I can provide.

HOMER

I didn't know that.

BYKOVSKI

Your father did.

(Homer nods
thoughtfully)

I'm just sorry I won't be able
to weld any more rockets for you.

Bykovski's about to get into the tippie with the other miners.
Then Homer has a sudden thought.

HOMER

Could you teach me how to weld?

BYKOVSKI

What...

HOMER

I mean, in your spare time. I
could meet you fifteen minutes
before your shifts and-

BYKOVSKI

Welding is very difficult, Homer.
You have to-

HOMER

I can learn.

BYKOVSKI

(laughs)

You don't give up, do you?

Homer's reply is simple.

HOMER

I can't.

EXT. CAPE COALWOOD - DAY

A gleaming, new, rocket is on the launchpad. Homer, Quentin and O'Dell watch from the blockhouse. Roy Lee's about to light the fuse when they hear the sound of an automobile driving up. The boys are surprised as it pulls up on the side of the road. Out steps Mr. Bolt from the machine shop with a couple of gum-chewing kids. Homer walks over.

BOLT

I heard you and Bykovski talking
about how you were gonna be
shooting off another of your
rockets up here today, and I
thought that might be something
I'd like to see.

(Homer nods)

That thing really gonna fly?

HOMER

I guess, we're about to find out...

Homer walks back to the blockhouse. Looks at the boys. Roy Lee lights the fuse and runs for the blockhouse. Before he gets there, the fuse reaches the powder and the rocket whooshes off the pad, climbing about fifty feet.

Everybody's impressed, but then as if aimed, the rocket turns, levels out, and heads directly at Mr. Bolt, lounging on his Pontiac fender. Homer shouts:

HOMER

Look out!

Mr. Bolt throws himself to the ground while the rocket hisses overhead and then slams into the road behind, skittering along until it plows into a muddy ditch. The gum-chewing kids applaud. But the rocket boys aren't pleased.

ROY LEE

Same as last time. We're not getting anywhere...

As O'Dell, Roy Lee and Quentin run off to retrieve the rocket, Homer helps Mr. Bolt to his feet.

HOMER

You all right?

Mr. Bolt waves him off. Then he lights a cigarette with trembling hands and takes a pull off a flask.

BOLT

Homer, I flew F-86's in Korea. Seeing that rocket come at me was almost like being back there.

HOMER

We're still working out some bugs.

The disheartened boys return with the rocket.

BOLT

I used to work explosives down at the mine. Let me have a look at that thing.

Quentin hands it over. Bolt inspects it.

BOLT

Hmm...good job on the weld, Homer, but the heat from the exhaust must've eaten away your washer.

QUENTIN

It's called a nozzle.

BOLT

Son, whatever you wanna call it, you're gonna need a new design...And better steel that can take the heat. SAE 1020 bar stock ought to do you fine. I'll be glad to order it for you if you can raise the money. It's pretty expensive though.

O'DELL

That's no problem.

HOMER

(surprised)

Where are we going to get any money?

EXT. OUTSKIRTS OF TOWN - DAY

The boys stand there looking out over miles of abandoned railroad track, it runs along the length of a river.

O'DELL

Just like I told you. Fifteen miles of scrap iron and scrap iron's like gold. All we have to do is dig it up.

The boys exchange smiles. A great idea.

EXT. RAILROAD TRACK - LATER

The boys have got their shirts off, the sun is beating down on them as they pound away at the thick iron rails. The sweat pours off them. This is back breaking work. The pitifully small pile of scrap iron they've collected so far is in the nearby wheelbarrow. Roy Lee's in a particularly foul mood.

ROY LEE

We'll be out here all week at the rate we're going. Great idea you had here, O'Dell...

Roy Lee walks to their supplies. From a bag he pulls out a moonpie and a bottle of pop.

ROY LEE

And is this all you brought along for us to eat? Moonpies and warm soda pop?

Roy Lee squats down on a rock to eat.

O'DELL
If you don't like it, don't eat
it.

ROY LEE
This is just pure bullshit...

Suddenly Homer, working nearby shouts:

HOMER
Shut up, Roy Lee.

ROY LEE
What...

HOMER
Shut up, and don't move. There's
a copperhead sitting next to you.

ROY LEE
(smirking)
Yeah, right...

QUENTIN
He's serious, Roy Lee, there's
a snake by your leg.

Roy Lee glances over and sure enough, there's a
ferocious-looking copperhead snake at his side. Roy Lee screams
and jumps five feet into the air. He rolls onto the ground.

HOMER
I told you not to move.

ROY LEE
(shouting)
A goddamned snake's getting ready
to chomp down on my balls, and
I'm supposed to just sit there?

HOMER
(he's kidding)
If he had bitten you in the balls,
one of them would have gladly
sucked out the poison. Right,
guys?

The boys respond with: "Hell no!" "Bullshit!" "No way!" etc.

Roy Lee grabs up a shovel and heads back to the snake.

HOMER
Be careful, Roy Lee...

ROY LEE

Okay, you slimy sonavabitch...I
hope you've had a nice life, cause
it's closing time...

Roy Lee swings the shovel mightily at the snake. He misses the terrified reptile by at least six inches, loses his footing, and falls over the embankment, tumbling all the way down to the river. The boys run to the edge. Roy Lee is pulling himself up onto the bank.

HOMER

Hey, Roy Lee are you all right?

ROY LEE

Oh, I'm great, Homer. I'm just
goddamned great.

Suddenly Homer is laughing hysterically. So are O'Dell and Quentin.

HOMER

Hey, Roy Lee? Good form going over
that hill.

QUENTIN

Excellent form. Can we see that
again?

O'DELL

(holding it up)
Here's your shovel.

The boys are laughing hysterically. Now even Roy Lee has to laugh.

EXT. SCRAP YARD - DAY

The exhausted boys stand by their wheel barrel which is loaded up with scrap iron. CHESTER MATNEY, a big, beefy guy counts out some money.

CHESTER

Thirty dollars and fifty cents.
(the boys smile)
What are you boys gonna do with
all that money?

INT. MACHINE SHOP - DAY

The machine shop is a beehive of activity. The machinists cut the new obviously much thicker steel tubing. Another machinist cuts out fins from a sheet of tin, and Homer is doing some welding. Bolt goes over the boys' crude blueprints for a new nozzle design with Quentin, Roy Lee and O'Dell.

QUENTIN

I'm concerned that the mass of the propellant added compared to the mass of the empty rocket will be too little.

Bolt is confused. O'Dell translates.

O'DELL

He's afraid it'll be too heavy.

BOLT

Suppose we made it longer?

QUENTIN

(thinking it over)

Longer would allow increased volume for the propellant without much additional mass.

O'DELL

(translation for Bolt)

Great idea.

EXT. HICKHAM HOUSE - NEAR DAWN

John steps outside and starts toward the mine. In a moment, Homer rushes out and catches up to him.

HOMER

Say, dad...

JOHN

What are you doing up so early?

HOMER

We're launching another rocket in a couple of hours. I was just thinking that maybe you might like to come and watch.

JOHN

Why would I want to do that?

HOMER

You always watch Jim play football.

JOHN

Jesus, Homer, football's important.

HOMER

This is important to me. We've been working really hard on this one and I think we-

John sighs and shakes his head. Homer waits. Finally:

JOHN
What time you say you're gonna
do this thing?

HOMER
Ten A.M.

John sighs and shakes his head. Homer waits. Finally:

JOHN
I'll see if I can make it.

John continues on toward the mine. Homer is thrilled.

EXT. CAPE COALWOOD - DAY

There's maybe twenty people here today. Miners, their wives, school kids, all leaning against their cars, drinking sodas, eating sandwiches, talking.

MAN ONE
I heard their last one nearly took
Bob Bolt's head off.

MAN TWO
Well, I've got my anti-aircraft
weapon all loaded up and ready
to go.

He produces a handgun. The other men laugh.

THE LAUNCH PAD

The brand new rocket that sits on the launchpad is longer, sleeker, and more sophisticated looking than any we've thus far seen. Homer and Quentin stand nearby with Miss Riley. The boys are all nervous about the spectators.

O'DELL
How do you think they found out
about it?

HOMER
Word gets out.

ROY LEE
We blow it this time, we're gonna
be laughing stocks.

HOMER
We'd better not blow it.
(proudly)
My father's coming.

O'DELL
No kidding?

QUENTIN
(disdainfully)
Who cares what any of them think
anyway?

ROY LEE
Easy for you to say, you're used
to people making fun of you.

MISS RILEY
Quentin's right. You don't have
to prove anything to them.

The boys smile. Until Miss Riley fixes them with a steely gaze.

MISS RILEY
You've got to prove it to me.

Homer knows that he is the main target of Miss Riley's remark.
He smiles and nods. Then:

O'DELL
Hey, Homer, it's your dad.

Homer glances over, sees the Buick. His eyes light up.

HOMER
Excuse me.

Homer rushes excitedly over to the Buick.

HOMER
Hey, dad, you're just in time to-

The door opens. It's Jim with about five other members of the
football team packed inside. Homer's disappointed.

HOMER
What are you doing here?

JIM
(points to the crowd)
Same as them. No more football
on Saturdays. You're the only
entertainment in town.

A big jock named BARNEY pipes up:

BARNEY
We were gonna go to the movies,
but then we thought, what the
hell, let's go see the rocket boys
blow themselves up.

The football players snicker. Homer doesn't care.

HOMER
Where's dad?

JIM
(a dumb question)
Down in the mine. Where else would
he be?

Then to Homer's surprise, Doris Ploss steps out of the car.

DORIS
Hi, Homer. Can your rocket really
fly?

In Doris's presence, Homer quickly forgets about his father.

HOMER
Hi, Doris....I hope so.

Suddenly Roy Lee and O'Dell are dragging Homer off.

ROY LEE
Damned thing had better fly or
you can kiss your chances of ever
losing your virginity goodbye.

Barney the jock puts his arm around Doris, and calls out:

BARNEY
Come on, Rocket Boys, let's see
it fly.

One by one, the crowd takes up the chant:

CROWD
Come on, Rocket Boys, let's see
it fly!

The nervous boys are at the launch pad. Homer glances at Miss Riley, who gives him an encouraging nod. Then to the boys:

HOMER
It won't fly unless somebody
lights the fuse...

And so he does. The crowd, not taking this seriously at all, counts down:

CROWD
TEN! NINE! EIGHT! SEVEN!

Only Barney isn't counting. He's munching on a ham sandwich.

Homer and the boys exchange anxious looks as the fuse gets smaller. And then:

THE ROCKET ERUPTS FROM THE LAUNCH PAD

-hurtling itself at the sky.

The crowd lets out a collective gasp as they watch with awe-filled faces. Nobody from the hills of West Virginia has ever seen anything like this. Barney chokes on his ham sandwich.

The boys rush from the blockhouse and watch as the rocket keeps climbing. Higher. Higher. And straight as an arrow. And then, finally, when the rocket arcs out of sight over the mountain, the silence is broken by Homer's brother Jim, who lets out a loud long whoop!

Now the whole crowd goes wild, cheering, applauding, swarming around the boys. Doris Ploss rushes to Homer.

DORIS

That was unbelievable.

Homer doesn't get a chance to respond as the jealous Barney rushes over and pulls her away. Grudgingly to Homer:

BARNEY

Yeah, Hickham, pretty neat.

Homer smiles. Imagine a football player jealous of him! Then the rocket boys surround him.

QUENTIN

I think we're finally getting somewhere.

The beaming Miss Riley throws her arms around them.

MISS RILEY

Congratulations, guys.

HOMER

(grinning)

What do you think of our science fair chances now?

MISS RILEY

I think they just improved.

The boys cheer and slap hands.

INT. HOMER'S HOUSE - DAY

The family's finishing breakfast. John seems distracted. Homer's trying on a new sweater. It's a little small.

ELSIE

I know it's not much, Homer, but
maybe next year when things pick
up...

HOMER

It's great, mom.

JIM

You look like a sausage.

ELSIE

He does not.

(to Homer)

It'll stretch some when you wear
it. Happy birthday, Homer.

(she gives him a kiss)

John...

JOHN

Huh? Oh, happy birthday, Homer.

Then Elsie produces a package. Hands it to Homer.

ELSIE

This came for you in the mail
yesterday. Must be a present from
grandma.

Homer opens the package. He just stares at it.

HOMER

It's an autographed picture...

JIM

Of grandma? I'd rather get socks.

HOMER

It's from Wernher Von Braun.

Homer proudly displays the picture of the somber-looking German
scientist. Homer's father scowls disgustedly.

ELSIE

Wonder how he knew it was your
birthday...

HOMER

I don't think he did,
mom...There's a letter.

(he reads)

"Dear Homer, congratulations on
your rocket building. Continue
your education and maybe one day-

Suddenly John Hickham smashes his fist down angrily on the table. Everybody is shocked. John glares at Homer.

JOHN

Instead of wasting your time
worrying about Cape Canaveral,
why not take some interest in your
own damned town?

Homer is stricken. He has no idea why his father is so angry.

HOMER

Dad, I-

JOHN

Mining coal may not be good enough
for you or your friend von Braun,
but it puts food on the table,
a roof over your head and-

ELSIE

(sharply)

John, it's his birthday.

John calms down. He regrets his outburst.

JOHN

Happy birthday.

John gets up and leaves the room.

JIM

What's with him?

Elsie sighs. Says to Homer, who's clearly hurt:

ELSIE

Things are getting even slower
at the mine, and there's strike
talk starting up again. Your
father's got-

HOMER

(finishes her sentence)

A lot on his mind. Well, I don't
give a good goddamn...

And with that, Homer walks out of the room.

INT. MISS RILEY'S CLASSROOM - DAY

While an excited Miss Riley looks on, Homer looks through a book
entitled PRINCIPLES OF GUIDED MISSILE DESIGN.

MISS RILEY

I had the librarian order it for you I don't know how many weeks ago, and it just came in. Just in time for your birthday.

Homer flips through the book. It's got chapter headings like "Momentum Theory Applied to Propulsion," and "Nomenclature for Determining the Combustion Volume of a Cylindrical Rocket Motor." Homer says grimly:

HOMER

It's great, Miss Riley. Thanks.

MISS RILEY

You don't like it?

HOMER

It's just that the math is so advanced. These formulas are based on calculus and differential equations...and look...advanced Trigonometry.

MISS RILEY

So?

HOMER

So I've been staying up till two in the morning as it is just trying to figure out regular Trig.

Miss Riley fixes him with an icy stare.

MISS RILEY

I thought you wanted to win the science fair?

HOMER

I do, but-

MISS RILEY

Well, as far as the judges are concerned, all Big Creek's good for is turning out football players.

HOMER

Miss Riley-

MISS RILEY

You're going to have work your tails off to prove them wrong. You're going to have to show them that you've got what it takes to-

HOMER

We've been doing pretty good so far, haven't we? We've-

Miss Riley is uncharacteristically on edge. She barks at Homer:

MISS RILEY

Pretty good won't cut it. Pretty good is nothing...

Homer is stunned. He's never seen Miss Riley so worked up.

MISS RILEY

Just getting them off the ground isn't good enough, Homer. You've got to know how your rockets fly...what makes them fly...

(a hard look)

I'll bet you don't even have the faintest idea what makes your rockets fly, do you?

As Miss Riley's eyes continue to bore into him, Homer finds himself reeling.

HOMER

Of course, I do. There's a law...of physics.

MISS RILEY

Go on.

HOMER

Something about actions... reactions...or something.

Again Miss Riley raises her voice contemptuously:

MISS RILEY

You'll never get to college. Or anyplace else. You're going to live and die in Coalwood. Well, it's no skin off my back.

Homer is stunned that Miss Riley would speak to him like this.

HOMER

Miss Riley....

Miss Riley is just staring at him. Then:

MISS RILEY

I'm sorry, Homer...I...

Turner walks in, drawn by the yelling.

TURNER

What's going on here? What did you do now, Mr. Hickham?

MISS RILEY

He didn't do anything, Mr. Turner. We were just...I was just explaining to Homer that-

Turner has noticed the book. He takes it from Homer. Looks it over.

MR. TURNER

Where did you get this?

HOMER

Miss Riley gave it to me.

Turner hands the book back to Homer as he glares at Miss Riley:

TURNER

It's our job to give these students an education, Miss Riley. Not false hopes.

Homer and Miss Riley exchange looks.

MISS RILEY

Mr. Turner...

TURNER

I've heard about your adventures, Mr. Hickham. Apparently the whole town has. But, I'm telling you this for your own good, rocket scientists don't come from mining towns. It's a simple concept, and one that you must grasp, or you'll be lost, Mr. Hickham. Lost for all time.

Homer just stands there, shaken. Then he begins to walk slowly off.

MISS RILEY

Homer, are you okay? Homer?

But Homer just keeps on going.

INT. LIVING ROOM - CONT.

Jim and Elsie are seated as John introduces Homer, who's just come home from school, to FRED SMITH, a burly guy in a suit.

JOHN

Homer, say hello to Fred Smith.

FRED

Hello, Homer.

As he shakes the guy's hand, Homer wonders why everybody's in such a great mood? Especially his father.

JOHN

(excited)

Homer, your brother Jim is going to play football for the University of West Virginia.

ELSIE

(bursting with pride)

They're offering him a full scholarship.

HOMER

(stunned)

But I thought because of the suspension...

SMITH

We didn't need to see Jim play this season. We already knew what your brother could do.

Though slightly dazed, Homer extends his hand to his brother.

HOMER

Congratulations, Jim.

SMITH

Tell me, son, do you play ball?

JOHN

No...no, he doesn't. Homer's a little too...

Homer can see that his father's embarrassed. It makes him angry.

HOMER

I'm a little too scrawny for football, right, dad?

His father shoots him a look. Jim's tone is slightly mocking as he says:

JIM

Homer shoots off rockets. Whoosh!

JOHN

Coach Smith's not interested, Jim.

FRED

(polite to Homer)

Rockets aren't exactly my field,
son, but if you work real hard,
maybe you'll get to go to college
too.

Jim laughs out loud.

JIM

Yeah. On a science fiction
scholarship.

It's been a long, bad day, and something snaps in Homer. He
wheels around to take a swing at his brother. Jim laughs as he
dodges the blow. Fred Smith is surprised, of course. John gets
in between the brothers, barks at Homer:

JOHN

Have you finally gone and lost
what little sense you had? What
the hell's gotten into you?

Homer storms out of the room.

INT. HOMER'S ROOM - EVENING

As the cheerful voices of his family and the football scout
drift up from below, Homer sits at his desk, desperately trying
to make heads or tails out of Miss Riley's rocket book. Finally
he slams it shut, and hurls it into the closet. Then he looks
at the autographed picture of Wernher von Braun on his desk.
In an effort to calm his frayed nerves, Homer sits back down
to compose a letter:

HOMER (V.O.)

Dear Dr. von Braun, thank you for
the autographed picture. It will
only further inspire me to keep
working toward our ridiculous,
impossibly stupid goal of...

Homer collects himself. He makes a correction.

HOMER (V.O.)

...Our all important goal of
winning that science fair in the
spring...

EXT. CAPE COALWOOD - DAY

There is quite a crowd out here today, maybe fifty people. WE
SEE Ike Bykovski and his wife, Mr. Dantzler from the store, Miss
Riley, even Homer's mom. The atmosphere is festive. Celebratory.
Everybody in town knows by now that these kids are on to
something.

Doris Ploss and the cheerleaders are doing an elaborate cheer.

DORIS

Give me an R. Give me a O. Give
me a C and a K. Then Rock It. Rock
it, boys. Then rock it. Rock it
boys. Go, Rocket Boys! Go!

The girls finish to great applause. Homer and the boys light
the fuse. The crowd counts down together. The rocket goes up.
A perfect launch. Homer and the crowd watch as the rocket sails
over the mountain and out of sight. Then:

The whole crowd cheers. Elsie Hickham, Bykovski and others rush
forward to offer their congratulations.

ELSIE

Homer, that was...hell, I don't
know what it was, but it sure was
something.

Bykovski rushes over with his wife. He puts an arm around Homer.
Says to his wife:

BYKOVSKI

I taught him everything he knows.
(with a wink)
About welding.

Miss Riley breaks through the crowd, exuberant.

MISS RILEY

Best one yet. It's because of that
book I gave you, isn't it?

HOMER

(lying, of course)
Oh, it's made all the difference.

Then BASIL OGLETHORPE, a thin, bald man emerges from the pack,
holding a pad and pen.

BASIL

Boys, I'm Basil Oglethorpe, with
the Big Creek Ledger. May I have
a word with you?

Before the boys can respond, Mr. Bykovski pipes up excitedly:

BYKOVSKI

You gonna write a newspaper story
about our boys?

BASIL

Yes, I thought-

BYKOVSKI

Tell in the story about how when
they first started out their
rockets were the size of pickles.

NEIGHBOR LADY

(chiming in)

I was there for the first one.
Homer blew his poor mama's fence
ten feet into the air. Right,
Elsie?

BOLT

But they never gave up. That's
the thing you gotta put in there.
Hell, they're gonna win the county
science fair this spring.

More people swarm around the flustered reporter. Homer and the
boys watch proudly as their fellow townsfolk sing their praises.

EXT. BIG CREEK HIGH SCHOOL - DAY

Homer and the guys sit outside on the steps reading this
morning's Big Creek Ledger.

HOMER

(reading aloud)

"The silvery cylinder burst forth
in a fiery column of smoke and
flame, racing the very wind as
it soared into the sky, a
messenger of these Rocket Boys
of Big Creek, these boys who use
their brains, not brawn, who play
not football but with Apollo's
fire."

(stops reading)

Oh, brother...

ROY LEE

Keep going, Homer. This is great.

HOMER

This is embarrassing. Besides,
no matter what this guy thinks,
we've still got a hell of a long
way to go before we can-

VOICE (O.S.)

Hello, Homer.

It's Doris Ploss, standing there, holding a copy of the
newspaper. Homer, as usual, is flustered.

HOMER

Doris, hi...

DORIS

Homer, would you please sign my newspaper?

The other rocket boys, stifle their laughter. Homer is oblivious to them. He just stares at Doris.

DORIS

I just know you're going to be really famous someday.

She hands Homer her copy of the newspaper and a pen. Homer just stands there, grinning dumbly. Doris waits. Roy Lee leans over.

ROY LEE

Your name is Homer Hickham. That's
H O M E R...

Doris giggles. Homer is embarrassed, but he's high as a rocket as he signs his name.

INT. CAFETERIA - DAY

The place is packed with hungry, noisy kids. Homer and the kids walk in. They are greeted with applause and cheers:

KIDS

It's the rocket boys!

Homer and the guys take mock bows, they're loving every bit of this attention. Then Homer grabs up a tray and gets on the food line behind his brother.

JIM

(snidely)

Newspaper's getting desperate if they gotta resort to writing stories about you little twerps.

HOMER

(putting Jim on)

I'm sure it's just cause there's no football to write about.

JIM

That's exactly what it is.

Now all the kids in the place react to the sight of principal Turner, who has just walked in with TWO STATE TROOPERS. Turner leads the troopers right to the startled Homer.

TROOPER ONE

You Homer Hickham?

HOMER

Yes, sir...

TROOPER ONE

You're under arrest.

The kids in the cafeteria gasp as the trooper slaps a pair of handcuffs on Homer. Principal Turner shouts:

TURNER

Everybody remain in your seats!

(looks around)

Them too. They're in on it.

The other trooper marches toward the stunned O'Dell, Roy Lee and Quentin, seated nearby. Miss Riley rushes over to Turner.

TURNER

This doesn't concern you, Miss Riley.

MISS RILEY

Like hell it doesn't.

TURNER

(ignoring her)

Tell me, Mr. Hickham...Can you account for all of your rockets?

MISS RILEY

Don't answer him, Homer. Nobody's going to say a word until we know what's going on here.

TURNER

(to the trooper)

Go on, tell her.

TROOPER ONE

Well, ma'am, last month we had a forest fire over in Welch. A mean one. A whole lot of land went up in smoke.

TURNER

They found one of their rockets lying by the side of the road.

The rocket boys, the students...everybody is shocked.

TROOPER ONE

We knew it started the fire, what we didn't know was who it belonged to.

TROOPER TWO
Until this morning.

He holds up the newspaper with the story about the Rocket Boys.

TURNER
(to Homer)
Can you, or can you not, account
for all of your rockets?

HOMER
(stricken)
No, sir...We can't.

TROOPER ONE
Let's go, son.

The Trooper marches Homer toward the door. The other trooper follows with the other rocket boys. Homer passes Doris Ploss, who's staring with disbelief. Homer has to look away.

INT. JAIL CELL - DAY

Homer and the guys sit on the floor in this squalid tiny cell.

QUENTIN
Something's not right about this.
Welch must be a good five miles
from Cape Coalwood...

ROY LEE
Shut up, Quentin.

QUENTIN
I'm merely suggesting that-

ROY LEE
That what? That there's somebody
else around these hills been going
around shooting off rockets?

HOMER
We've lost plenty of rockets,
Quentin. Guess this was one of
them.

A trooper appears at the cell door with a key.

TROOPER
Let's go.

INT. COURT ROOM - DAY

The kids stand before the JUDGE. Their extremely upset parents are on hand. Homer is aware of his father's eyes on him.

JUDGE

If you boys weren't minors, I'd have you locked up in the state penitentiary. As things stand, I could send you to the boy's reformatory till you turn eighteen. But superintendent Hickham has given me his personal guarantee that there's not going to be any more of this rocket building bullshit, isn't that right, sir?

John Hickham stands up tall, but he's mortified. Homer dares not even look at him.

JOHN

Yes, Your Honor.

JUDGE

(back to the boys)

So I'm going to have your rocket things confiscated and release you into the custody of your parents. Leave it to them to discipline your sorry asses...

EXT. COURT HOUSE - DAY

Homer is leaving with his silent, somber father.

HOMER

Dad-

JOHN

Not now...

They're about to get into the Buick when they see Roy Lee and his father, EARL in the parking lot. Earl's drunk, and he's slapping Roy Lee around.

EARL

You stupid sonavabitch...I oughtta goddamn kill you.

He drives his fist into Roy Lee's stomach. He's about to hit him again, when John Hickham rushes over and grabs his arm.

EARL

We ain't in the mine now, Hickham. This ain't your business.

JOHN

Listen to me, you drunken sonavabitch...

(more)

JOHN (Cont'd)
If I see him with a bruise, you
get a scar. I see him with a limp,
you get crutches.

John roughly releases Earl and starts back toward Homer. Earl
calls after him:

EARL
I'm reporting you to the union.

JOHN
(muttering)
Screw you and your goddamned
union...
(opens car door)
Get in, Homer.

Homer wants to tell his dad how proud he is of him for saving
Roy Lee, but he knows he'd better just keep his mouth shut.

INT. THE CAR - DAY

Homer sits silently beside his father.

JOHN
...starting a fire, destroying
state property, hell, you oughtta
get down on your knees and thank
the good lord you didn't kill
anybody.

HOMER
I know that, dad.

JOHN
I've been confused by you, pissed
off by you...but, Homer, this is
the first time in your life that
I've ever been ashamed of you.

Homer just sits there, wishing he could disappear.

EXT. A CLEARING - NIGHT

Homer and the boys pass a jug of moonshine back and forth.
They're all a bit drunk.

O'DELL
Man, this is like drinking the
devil's own piss.

HOMER
It's not so bad.

ROY LEE

Not so bad? I've got smoke coming
out of my dick.

QUENTIN

Let me have it.

The boys watch in astonishment as Quentin chugs down about a
pint of the nasty stuff. The boys chuckle. Then Homer looks out
at something, mutters:

HOMER

I hope you get a damn rupture,
you sonavabitch...

Now all the boys are looking across the way at-

CAPE COALWOOD

Where the pair of state troopers are loading the boys' rocket
building supplies into the trunk of their car. The troopers are
unaware of the boys' presence.

Then the car drives off. They boys watch with broken hearts.

O'DELL

Well, that's it, the end of Cape
Coalwood...

Homer shakes his head, and says defiantly:

HOMER

They can't put an end to Cape
Coalwood...only we can do that...

Homer grabs the bottle of moonshine from Quentin and starts
walking purposefully toward the Cape. The confused boys follow
him. When they get to the cape, Homer pulls off his shirt and
rips off his undershirt which he starts tearing into pieces.
The stunned boys realize that he's making a molotov cocktail.

ROY LEE

Jesus, Homer...

As Homer stuffs a piece of the tee-shirt into the end of the
moonshine bottle he says:

HOMER

Who's got a match?

O'Dell produces one. Hands it to Homer. Homer's about to light
it. Quentin cries out:

QUENTIN

Don't do it, Homer. We worked too
hard. It means too much. It-

HOMER

Maybe someday some guys with better luck and better sense will pick up where we left off. Maybe they'll be the ones to make it. But not us, Quentin. It's not going to be us.

Homer lights the molotov cocktail and hurls it at the wooden blockhouse. The boys just stand there watching as the blockhouse goes up in flames along with their dreams. Then Homer says with forced conviction:

HOMER

Come on. Let's go have some fun for a change.

Homer leads them off. The flames completely consume the blockhouse. Nobody looks back.

INT. OWL'S NEST RESTAURANT BASEMENT - NIGHT

The place is packed with dancing teenagers. Homer and the guys descend the stairs into the dimly lit room.

O'DELL

There's Emily Sue and Tootsie Rose. Come on, Quentin.

QUENTIN

(protesting)

They watched us get arrested. We're practically ex-convicts.

O'DELL

Exactly. They'll be too scared to turn us down.

O'Dell drags Quentin off. Homer just stands there, scanning the room. Roy Lee smiles.

ROY LEE

If you meant what you said about having some fun, forget about Doris Ploss and concentrate on that.

Roy Lee takes Homer's head and points him in the direction of the lovely Valentine Carmina, who's smiling at Homer.

ROY LEE

You're crazy if you don't go for it.

But once again Homer begins to scan the room.

HOMER

I heard that Doris broke up with
that dumb jock Barney...

ROY LEE

See you later, Hopeless...

Roy Lee heads off after a passing pretty girl. Homer just stands there getting jostled.

INT. SAME SCENE - LATER

The kids are dancing slow to Tommy Edwards' "All in the Game." Even Quentin's on the floor cheek to cheek with a girl. Homer's in the corner, talking to a couple of kids.

HOMER

All things considered, we got off
pretty easy. I mean, hell, it
looked for a while there like that
judge was gonna throw the book
at us. I was afraid that...

Then he sees her. Doris Ploss has just walked in. She is standing alone just inside the door, beautiful in her pale green sweater and black skirt. One kid says:

KID

Go for it, Homer. She likes you.

Homer takes a breath and off he goes. He makes his way through the crowd toward her. He's half way there when suddenly a boy appears behind Doris and wordlessly takes her hand. Homer's heart sinks as the boy leads Doris out onto the dance floor. Doris's date is an arrogant, good-looking jock. And not just any jock. It's Homer's brother Jim.

Homer is in agony as he watches his brother take Doris in his arms, whisper in her ear and move her slowly across the floor. Homer can hardly breathe. Then a hand on his shoulder.

VOICE (O.S.)

Homer?

Homer turns. It's the lovely and very sexy Valentine Carmina.

VALENTINE

Would you like to dance?

Homer just looks at her dumbly for a moment. Then instinctively he takes the hand she holds out to him. They begin to dance.

VALENTINE

I'm glad you didn't go to jail.

But Homer, who's still got his eye on Jim and Doris, is scarcely paying attention to her.

HOMER

Oh yeah..?

VALENTINE

You know, I sure did love watching your rockets go up, Homer. It was so exciting...

As Valentine begins to lick his ear and grind against him, Homer forgets all about Doris Ploss and shooting off rockets.

EXT. AN OLD DODGE - NIGHT

It's parked under the bridge. The windows are steamed. WE HEAR groans of pleasure from within.

INT. THE DODGE - NIGHT

Homer and Valentine are going at it hot and heavy. When they're through, Valentine lies there in Homer's arms.

VALENTINE

Just think, Homer...no matter how many girls you ever get to know in your life, you're never gonna forget me. I'll always be your first.

Homer just lying there with an idiot's delighted grin.

VALENTINE

What are you thinking?

Homer would desperately like to believe this.

HOMER

I'm thinking that maybe Coalwood's not such a bad place after all...

EXT. PICK-UP TRUCK - NIGHT

Thunder and lightning crash across the mountains. The rain is pouring down. But Homer and the guys don't care. They're riding in the back of somebody's pick-up, singing, if you could call it that, at the top of their lungs.

BOYS

"You ain't nothing, but a hound dog. Crying all the time. You ain't nothing, but a hound dog, crying all the time...etc."

Then they laugh. Spirits are soaring. They all had a great time tonight. Especially Homer.

O'DELL

Hell, it sure is coming down...

HOMER

I love the rain.

ROY LEE

You love not being a virgin anymore.

O'DELL

Okay, Homer, give. We want details. Details.

As they approach the town, Quentin is the first to notice something strange.

QUENTIN

There's something wrong...All the lights are on.

Sure enough, the lights of every house are turned on.

INT. HOMER'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Homer rushes inside. No sign of anybody.

HOMER

Mom?

Homer rushes through the house. He finds Elsie at the kitchen table, staring vacantly at her painting of Myrtle Beach.

HOMER

Mom, what is it, what's-

Elsie turns to him. She speaks as if she was the guard to the very gates of Hell.

ELSIE

Listen to me, Homer. You are not to go to the mines. No matter what else you do this night, you mustn't do that.

HOMER

(frightened now)

Mom, what happened? Where's dad?

It's clear Elsie's in a state of barely contained hysteria.

ELSIE

I begged him not to go there. The
rescue squad could handle it.
They-

HOMER

Mom-

ELSIE

I swear to God, if he gets killed
I won't shed a tear.

Homer bolts through the door. His anguished mother calls after
him to no avail.

EXT. PATH TO THE MINE - NIGHT

As Homer rushes up the muddy path toward the mine, thunder booms
and lightning flashes, the rain is coming in driving sheets.
He can see an ambulance driving across the mountain.

EXT. MINE ENTRANCE - NIGHT

Everybody in Coalwood seemed to be gathered here. A barrier
of saw horses has been erected and the women whose husbands are
inside the mine stand behind them. The Salvation Army is on hand
handing out sandwiches and coffee. A REVEREND offers comfort
and prayers. The ambulance arrives and medics jump out.

The frantic Homer walks alongside harried foreman, Jake Mosby.

JAKE

Two fans got struck by lightning,
and then the methane started
seeping. That's when your dad
went down there. Not thirty
minutes later, there was a bump
by the face. A bad one.

A baby wails behind the saw horses and a Salvation Army lady
takes it and rocks it quiet while its mother sags in the arms
of another woman.

INT. MINE SHAFT - NIGHT

It's chaos down here, rocks, rubble and wounded miners. A RESCUE
WORKER shouts into the mine telephone.

RESCUE WORKER

It isn't good, but it could have
been worse... much worse.

INT. MINE OFFICE - NIGHT

Mine official Van Dyke hangs up the phone and rushes out of the
office. He addresses the crowd.

VAN DYKE

They're all alive. Except for one.

Homer and the crowd surge forward. Van Dyke takes a breath.

VAN DYKE

One man's been found dead.

The crowd reacts. The wives behind the saw horses drop their heads and pray quietly. Jake puts an arm around Homer.

Then the tippie winch begins to creak. Time stands still as everyone looks up at the cage spool as it slowly began to turn. The cage is coming up. The waiting wives shudder as if a cold wind has blown through them. Nobody makes a sound. Then, finally, after an eternity, the cage appears, carrying a dozen men, their faces black as the night sky. Some of them are being held up by others. The wives push up against the saw horses and then knock them over to get at their men. Some fall but they pick themselves up and keep on going in a frenzied rush. As the men step off the cage, the wives throw themselves at them.

Homer, on the edge of the crowd, is craning his neck. Then he sees his father, the last man off the cage. John Hickham's helmet is gone and he's got a bloody bandage around his head, covering his right eye. He walks nearly trance-like, seemingly oblivious to the rescue workers, who shake his hand and pat his back. Then Homer breaks through to him.

HOMER

Dad...

As the cage once more descends to pick up the rest of the men, John Hickham tries to focus.

JOHN

Homer...Where's your mother?

John Hickham nearly falls over. A rescue worker steadies him.

RESCUE WORKER

Doc!

The DOCTOR rushes over. They all help John to sit down.

RESCUE WORKER

A cable snapped and hit him in the head. Cracked his helmet right in half.

DOCTOR

I hope to God, I can save the eye.

The tippie cage is once again on it's way up. When it appears the doors open and two rescue workers emerge, carrying the covered up body of the dead miner.

As they walk the stretcher off, the rescue worker says to Homer:

RESCUE WORKER

A dozen men would have died tonight if it hadn't been for your dad. That's something a son should know.

Homer takes this in. Then, the crowd parts as the reverend walks the sobbing miner's widow toward the body. Homer realizes, to his horror, that the widow is Ida Bykovski.

HOMER

Mr. Bykovski...No...no...

Homer's in shock as he staggers toward her. He wants to talk to the widow of his friend. But then he is stopped by a voice from behind that says:

VOICE (O.S.)

Not now, Homer.

Homer turns around. It's his mother. Elsie Hickham has regained her self-control, but Homer's on the verge of losing his.

HOMER

Mom...mom...He was...he was my friend.

ELSIE

(holding him)

Ike Bykovski faced death every day. All of them do. You have to be strong, son.

Then she releases Homer. Homer is reeling as he watches his mother rush over to where the doctor is still working on John.

DOCTOR

(to Elsie)

He's drifting in and out of consciousness. He may have fractured his skull.

Elsie kneels beside her husband and removes a small envelope from her pocket. From the envelope she removes a few small mica chips, carbon crystals formed in the coal.

ELSIE

Do you remember when you gave me these, John? It was our first anniversary. You said, "You always wanted diamonds but these are the best I can do. I wish they were real."

(more)

ELSIE (Cont'd)

John, I never wanted diamonds.
I only wanted a little of your
time. That's still all I want.

She rests her head on her husband's shoulder and tries to be strong. Homer walks over and takes her hand.

INT. HICKHAM HOUSE - DAWN

Homer, his mother and Jim are seeing the doctor out.

DOCTOR

As far as saving that eye goes,
we'll just have to wait and see.
But provided you can keep him at
home for the next couple of
months, I'm reasonably sure that
he'll be fine.

Everybody breathes a huge sigh of relief.

ELSIE

Thank you, doctor...

The doctor leaves. The Hickham's close the door behind him.

JIM

Tomorrow morning I'll go down to
the mine and get Jake Mosby to
sign me on.

ELSIE

(upset)

You can't do that. What about
school?

JIM

Dad's gonna be laid up for at
least a couple of months. The
company won't carry us that long,
and we're barely scraping by as
it is. I'll have to drop out.

Homer speaks up forcefully.

HOMER

No. You finish high school, Jim.
I'll go to work in the mine.

JIM

I'm the eldest. It's my
responsibility.

HOMER

Your responsibility is to be the first one in the Hickham family to go to college.

JIM

But what about you, Homer? You're the smart one.

There's no bitterness, just resignation in Homer's voice as he says:

HOMER

Going to college was just a crazy pipe dream. I've already let it go.

INT. PRINCIPAL TURNER'S OFFICE - DAY

Principal Turner watches as Homer signs a paper, making his departure from high school official.

TURNER

In my thirty years at this school, I've seen the brightest boys become coal miners. The brightest young ladies become the wives of coal miners. High I.Q.'s and lofty ambitions were not enough to change their destinies. I believe I tried to tell you that, Mr. Hickham.

HOMER

(grimly)
Yes, sir...

TURNER

Good luck, Mr. Hickham.

Turner offers his hand. Homer hates that Turner will be proved right about his future, but refusing to shake hands wouldn't change things. So Homer shakes his hand.

INT. SCHOOL CORRIDOR - DAY

Homer is clearing out his locker. He feels somebody watching him. He turns to see Miss Riley, standing down the corridor.

HOMER

Miss Riley-

But she's gone. Homer goes after her.

INT. CORRIDOR - MOMENTS LATER

Homer's walking alongside Miss Riley, who is quite angry.

HOMER

But I have to leave school. I have no choice.

MISS RILEY

As long as you are alive on this planet, oh, yes you do have a choice.

HOMER

You might try being a little bit more understanding instead of-

MISS RILEY

Goodbye, Homer.

Miss Riley picks up her pace. Homer stops walking. Mutters through clenched teeth:

HOMER

The hell with you...

INT. HOMER'S ROOM - NIGHT

Homer's sound asleep. His alarm clock goes off. It's 4 A.M. Homer wakes up and shuts it off.

INT. HOMER'S ROOM - SHORT TIME LATER

Homer's wearing overalls as he sits on the bed, pulling on heavy, grimy work boots. Then he stands up, picks up his miner's helmet, places it on his head and walks out of the room. Right past the picture of Dr. Wernher von Braun, still on the desk.

EXT. THE MINE ENTRANCE - DAWN

The mostly silent miners climb aboard the tibble that will lower them into the shaft below. Homer is among them. The tibble starts up. Slowly the tibble lowers the elevator. Homer looks up at the still, dark sky. Watches it disappear as he's drawn lower and lower beneath the earth.

INT. THE MINE - DAY

The worst job down here is shoveling out the piles of rock and coal dust the miners call the gob. The faces of the men on this detail are so grimy and blackened with coal dust that it's nearly impossible to make out their faces. Still, we can make out one. It's the face of Homer Hickham - resigned, resolute and no longer quite so young.

EXT. NEAR MINE ENTRANCE - DAY

Homer, O'Dell, Roy Lee and Quentin are sitting nearby having sandwiches. Homer's enjoying being around his friends again.

O'DELL
Everybody says to say, hi. Bennet,
Michael, Billy...

ROY LEE
(slyly)
Valentine Carmina.

HOMER
How about Miss Riley?

ROY LEE
She's hasn't been around that
much.

O'DELL
I heard she's been sneaking off
to see some boyfriend over in
Welch.

HOMER
Miss Riley..?

Then O'Dell changes the subject.

O'DELL
Everybody's always asking if we're
going to start shooting our
rockets off again. I guess, they
miss 'em. I know I sure as hell
do.

ROY LEE
Man, we sure did make some noise
around this place, didn't we,
Homer?

Homer looks away. This is a painful subject.

HOMER
I try not to think about it. It
feels too bad to think about it.

The boys are quiet for a moment. Finally Quentin dares pose the question that's been on all of their minds. He nods toward the mine as he says:

QUENTIN
So Homer...what's it like down
there?

The boys stare intently at Homer. Homer can see that they're frightened. He says lightly:

HOMER

You get used to it after awhile.
And shoveling coal's got it's
advantages. Check this out.

Homer makes a muscle. The boys feel it. They're impressed.

ROY LEE

No wonder my old man can hit so
hard.

HOMER

A month down there and you'll be
able to knock him out.

Roy Lee glances at the mine. Says grimly:

ROY LEE

I'm in no hurry.

Homer smiles sadly.

ROY LEE

I didn't mean anything by that,
Homer. I just-

HOMER

It's okay.

QUENTIN

We'd better be getting back.

SAME SCENE - MOMENTS LATER

Homer stands watching as his friends walk off. Then the whistle
blows. Homer turns and heads back toward the mine.

INT. HOMER'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Homer walks in, exhausted from the day's work. He's heading
toward the stairs when his mother walks out of the den.

ELSIE

He wants to see you. He's been
waiting.

INT. THE DEN - MOMENTS LATER

Homer walks inside. We don't see his father yet.

JOHN (O.S.)

Hi, Homer. Sit down. Over there
so I can see you.

Now WE SEE John Hickham. He looks dreadful. One side of his face and head are wrapped with bandage. He looks older. Homer sits facing his father's good eye.

HOMER

How are you feeling?

JOHN

Well, I've felt better, Homer,
I can tell you that...

Homer can see that there's something his father would like to say to him.

HOMER

Now, said you wanted to see me.

JOHN

This whole damned year, it's been pretty rough going down at the mine. Bad tempers and a lot of strike talk. I'd appreciate it if you'd keep me informed.

HOMER

Yes sir.

JOHN

An accident...especially one when a man gets killed, it makes everybody edgier.

A sadness comes over Homer, his father can see it.

JOHN

In a way, I guess, I'm the one responsible for what happened to Ike Bykovski. I got him transferred to the mine.

HOMER

You just tried to help him out.

JOHN

Yeah, well...I guess things don't always turn out the way we expect.

Homer appreciates that his father is trying, in his way, to offer him support.

HOMER

No, sir. I guess, they don't.

INT. HICKHAM KITCHEN - NIGHT

The family eats dinner. The bandage is off John Hickham's head. He announces casually:

JOHN

I saw the doc today. He says I can go back to work in a couple of weeks.

Everybody reacts happily to this news. Elsie hugs him, Jim slaps his back. Homer smiles:

HOMER

That's great, dad.

JOHN

We all appreciate the sacrifice you made here, Homer, but pretty soon you'll be able to go back and finish up the school year.

Homer stuns the family by saying:

HOMER

I'm not going back to school.

JOHN

Why not?

HOMER

There's only another couple of months or so left to the term. Besides, it would only make going back to the mines that much harder after I graduate next year. I'd rather just stay put.

JIM

(trying to be helpful)
And what's a coal miner need with a high school diploma anyway?

ELSIE

(to Homer)
Well, I think you oughtta finish high school. Tell him, John. Tell him to stay in school.

John looks at Homer. Seeing him with new eyes.

JOHN

Homer's not a boy anymore. I don't suppose I can tell him much of anything anymore.

They resume eating.

INT. MINE SHAFT - DAY

John Hickham's back on the job. He's talking to foreman, Jake Mosby as they walk through the shaft.

JAKE

I'm telling you, John, if these men don't start seeing a bigger paycheck pretty soon then-

JOHN

Give it a rest. It's my first day back. How's he doing, anyway?

John nods toward Homer, who's among a group of miners banging away at the wall with their pick axes.

JAKE

Hell, if you ask me, he's a chip off the old block.

Jake goes off. John just stands there, watching Homer. Then he walks over to him. Homer is surprised to see him.

JOHN

So is mining coal as terrible as you figured it'd be?

HOMER

I guess not. But almost.

John smiles. He's about to start away. But then:

JOHN

I'm headed for the face. You want to come along?

INT. ANOTHER MINE SHAFT - DAY

Homer and his father ride through the black tunnel aboard a man trip, an enclosed car, pulled by an electric locomotive. John Hickham is filled with enthusiasm as he speaks to his son. He pulls out a package of chewing tobacco.

JOHN

I love going to the face. That's where I see if my plan for the day is working. I see it all in my head days before. The cut the continuous miners will take, the route of the loaders, the roof bolts going in...

John places a chaw between his teeth. He's about to put the package away. Then he offers the package to Homer. Homer accepts it gratefully. He imitates his father as he bites off a piece of the tobacco. John continues talking.

JOHN
...And it's all in place when I
get there, just as I saw it. I'm
telling you, Homer, it's a hell
of a feeling...

Homer's father has never spoken this freely with him before. It's almost like two friends talking. Homer smiles as he tries to get the hang of his chewing tobacco.

INT. FACE OF THE MINE - DAY

This is where most of the activity takes place. It's the nerve center of the mine. Homer and his father stand observing.

JOHN
Every day I meet with the General
Superintendent and his engineers
and we go over what I've seen
right here. Even though I don't
have that piece of paper, that
degree from a college, they listen
to me. You know why?

HOMER
Because you know more than they
do.

JOHN
You bet your life, I do. Homer,
I know the mine like I know a man.
Hell, I can take one look around
and...

Then John Hickham begins to cough. That violent, ugly cough.

HOMER
Dad...you okay?

When he stops coughing, John Hickham smiles at his son.

JOHN
You really think that I'm afraid
of some coal dust?

He reaches down and comes up with a handful of coal dust. He throws it up and breathes it in. Homer stands transfixed.

JOHN
I love this stuff. It's in my
blood.

Then John Hickham puts his hand on Homer's shoulder. They walk back toward the electric car.

JOHN

Hell, I was born for this, Homer.
You're my son. I guess, it
shouldn't really surprise me that
you are too.

Homer's never gotten much in the way of kind words from his father and now his heart soars with pride.

INT. COMPANY STORE - DAY

As Elsie stands at the counter, waiting her turn to pay, she overhears TWO WOMEN, standing nearby.

WOMAN ONE

It's one thing when the mine takes
a life, but this...this just don't
seem right somehow...

WOMAN TWO

I understand the poor little
thing's known about it for months.

Elsie is stricken, she doesn't even realize that it's her turn to pay. Mr. Dantzler's waiting.

DANTZLER

That gonna do it for you, Elsie?
(no response)
Elsie?

EXT./INT. HOMER'S HOUSE - EVENING

Elsie holds the door open as Homer and his father walk inside.

JOHN

Hold dinner for awhile, will you,
Elsie. I have to make a call.

John heads for the kitchen. Homer starts for the stairs.

HOMER

I'm gonna get cleaned up.

ELSIE

Homer...

Homer turns around. Realizes that something is very wrong.

ELSIE

I was in the store today. I heard
some talk. Oh, Homer, I don't even
know how to tell you this...

EXT. SMALL HOUSE - NIGHT

Homer's finger trembles as he rings the doorbell. Then the door is opened by Miss Riley, who is surprised to see him.

MISS RILEY

Homer.

Homer is awkward and uncomfortable. His speech is stilted. And his heart is breaking.

HOMER

I just wanted to say hi. I haven't seen you in awhile and I happened to be in Big Creek so...hi.

Miss Riley regards him for a moment. Then:

MISS RILEY

You know about my illness, don't you?

Homer just stands there, speechless. Miss Riley smiles.

MISS RILEY

Nice overalls.

Homer tries to smile. But he just can't.

INT. MISS RILEY'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Miss Riley's on the sofa. Homer's on a chair across from her. Various medicine bottles can be seen on the shelf.

MISS RILEY

It's hard to keep a secret in a little town like this, but I guess I did a pretty good job.

Homer looks devastated. Miss Riley tries to smile.

MISS RILEY

Don't get the idea that I'm going to kick the bucket right away. Sometimes Hodgkin's goes into remission. I might have...some time.

Homer is fighting tears.

HOMER

Is there anything I can do?

MISS RILEY

You can accept my apology.

HOMER

For what?

MISS RILEY

(smiling)

You know for what...I'd just like for you to understand why I treated you so badly.

HOMER

You don't have to-

MISS RILEY

I want to. When you find yourself maybe facing the end of things...you want to feel proud of your life's work. I'm a teacher, Homer. My life's work is my students. That's why I got so upset with you over that book I gave you for your birthday, and why I was so mean to you the day you left school. I believed that if you guys could win that science fair, get scholarships and maybe go off and do something great with your lives...then my life would have counted for something. I know it wasn't fair for me to pin all my hopes on you, and I apologize for that, but Homer I just could not accept that you worked so hard and came all that way just to end up in the coal mines. Frankly, I don't understand how you accept it.

HOMER

(defensive)

We gave it our best shot. Sometimes things just don't work out.

MISS RILEY

I may never see thirty. I know all about things not working out.

Homer is stunned by her bluntness. She keeps pressing.

MISS RILEY

Listen to me, the mine is not your destiny. Not unless you want it to be. Do you?

Homer's too overwhelmed to answer. Miss Riley smiles sadly.

MISS RILEY

You've always been special to me,
and I want you to know something.
Whether you stay down in the mines
or go up to the moon, as long as
you don't waste the gift God gave
you...

(gently taps his head)
I'll always be proud of you.

INT. HOMER'S ROOM - NIGHT

Homer lies in bed, staring at the darkness. Finally he gets out of bed and turns on the light. He walks to his closet, looks around and finally finds the book on rockets, given to him by Miss Riley. He wipes the dust off its cover. Then he goes to his desk and opens the book. He's not looking for anything in particular as he scans the table of contents, but then the chapter on ALTITUDE AND RANGE OF ROCKET FLIGHTS gets his attention. He turns to that chapter and begins to look it over.

SAME SCENE - LATER

It's nearly dawn. Homer's still at his desk with the book when his alarm clock goes off. He doesn't even hear it. He's found something of interest to him. He mutters:

HOMER

Sonavabitch...

EXT. MINE ENTRANCE - DAY

While the other miner's have their lunch, Homer devours the rocket book. The whistle blows, summoning the miners back to work. Homer just keeps reading.

INT. HOMER'S HOUSE - NIGHT

The family's having dinner. Homer gets up from the table.

ELSIE

Sit down, Homer.

HOMER

I'm not hungry.

ELSIE

You haven't been hungry for over
three weeks.

JOHN

Leave him alone, Elsie. It isn't
a crime.

Then John gives Homer a friendly wink as he says:

JOHN

Go on, Homer.

Homer smiles at his dad and takes off. Elsie shakes her head.

INT. HOMER'S ROOM - NIGHT

Homer's at his desk, cross referencing the rocket book with his Trigonometry textbook. He pulls out a piece of paper and starts working out an equation.

EXT. A SMALL HOUSE - NIGHT

Homer's tapping on a window. The coal train passes by. It rattles the house and sprays Homer with coal dust. Finally a sleepy Quentin appears in the window. He's shocked to see Homer at his window in the middle of the night.

HOMER

I've got to talk to you.

INT. QUENTIN'S ROOM - NIGHT

Homer and Quentin are at the kitchen table, looking over the books and notebooks, whispering in the near darkness.

HOMER

...according to the book, the classic calculation for maximum range of an essentially ballistic missile is defined by this equation: $d = v^2/g \sin 2A$. d equals the distance the rocket travels, v , the velocity of the rocket, g the acceleration of gravity and A the angle at lift off...

QUENTIN

Go on...

HOMER

So what I did was I took the velocity of the rocket we lost and the worst possible angle it could fly...45 degrees I think and plugged it into this equation I came up with.

Homer shows Quentin an equation he's scribbled in his notebook. Quentin can't believe his eyes.

QUENTIN

You figured this equation out by yourself? Homer, this is Newtonian physics...

HOMER
Whatever it is...if I did the math
right it proves...

QUENTIN
(shouting)
It proves that our lost rocket
couldn't fly five miles. It proves
we didn't start that fire.

A an angry voice shouts from another room.

VOICE (O.S.)
Quentin, what the hell are you
doing?

HOMER
(low voice)
Proving it on paper is one thing,
but if this stuff is right, we
ought to be able to figure out
exactly where our missing rocket
landed. That'll be our real proof.
(Quentin nods)
I'm gonna need your help with the
trig part.

INT. QUENTIN'S HOUSE - DAWN

Homer and Quentin have worked through the night, they're
exhausted but exhilarated. Homer's got a map. He circles an area
in red.

HOMER
...six thousand, three hundred
and twenty-eight feet...or...

QUENTIN
One point two miles.

Homer starts collecting his stuff.

HOMER
You coming with me?

QUENTIN
I've got three finals. Don't you
have to go to the mine?

Homer hadn't even thought about it.

EXT. CAPE COALWOOD - DAY

Homer crouches by the launchpad, looks out over the horizon,
toward the mountain.

HOMER
One point two miles...Six
thousand, three hundred and
twenty-eight feet...

Homer stands up. Then off he goes, counting each step.

HOMER
One. Two. Three. Four...

EXT. A CLEARING IN WOODS - DAY

Homer walks in, still counting his steps.

HOMER
Six thousand, three hundred and
twenty-seven. Six thousand, three
hundred and twenty-eight.

This is it. Homer stops. Looks around hopefully.

HOMER
Come on...come on you
sonavabitch...I know you're around
here somewhere...

INT. HIGH SCHOOL MEN'S ROOM - DAY

Quentin's in here with O'Dell and Roy Lee, who's smoking a
cigarette. Quentin's excited.

QUENTIN
I'm telling you, we figured out
exactly where that rocket is.

ROY LEE
I'll believe it when I see it.

O'DELL
The science fair is still three
weeks off. If he does find it,
we could still-

The door is thrown open by Principal Turner. Roy Lee furtively
stubs out the cigarette and puts the butt in his back pocket.

TURNER
I'm taking over Mr. Lockhart's
science class today.
(pointed)
You boys are in that class aren't
you?

The boys murmur that they are. Then Turner makes a face:

TURNER
I smell cigarette smoke.

The boys feign innocence as they quickly file out of the bathroom. Turner follows at their heels.

EXT. THE CLEARING - DAY

Homer is still looking for that rocket. But the grass is tall in areas. It's hard to see. Homer's getting more frantic.

HOMER
Come on, you sonavabitch. I know
you're here. You've got to be
here. Where are you, goddamnit!

Then Homer trips over something. He goes down hard. Tears his pants.

HOMER
Shit...

He turns around to see what he tripped over. His face lights up with pure delight. The lost rocket.

EXT. BIG CREEK HIGH - DAY

A truck pulls up. Homer pulls out his back pack and the rocket. He hoists it up over his shoulder, nods his thanks to the driver, and starts marching toward the school.

INT. HIGH SCHOOL - DAY

A kid at the water fountain, nearly chokes as he sees Homer walking down the hall with a rocket on his shoulder.

INT. MISS RILEY'S CLASS ROOM - DAY

No class in session. Miss Riley is alone at her desk, doing paperwork. She looks pale and tired. Then:

HOMER (O.S.)
Hello, Miss Riley.

Miss Riley looks up to see Homer standing there with that rocket on his shoulder. She doesn't know exactly what's going on, but she's got a pretty good idea. She gets up and walks over to Homer. Her eyes are glistening as she reaches out and touches his cheek.

INT. MR. TURNER'S CLASS - DAY

Turner's lecturing when the door opens. There stands Homer with his rocket and Miss Riley. Turner and the class are shocked. The rocket boys exchange excited looks. Quentin shouts:

QUENTIN
Prodigious!

The rocket boys jump out of their seats and start pounding Homer's back. Turner barks:

TURNER
Get back to your seats!
(to Homer)
Mr. Hickham, Miss Riley, what is the meaning of this?

MISS RILEY
They didn't do it, Mr. Turner.
They didn't start that fire.

Turner is surprised. The class is buzzing. Homer speaks up.

HOMER
According to our notes, the only rocket we lost around the time that fire got started is this one you're looking at right here.

Homer drops the rocket down onto the floor. He waits for a reaction from Turner, who is eyeing him. Then:

TURNER
In the first place, I resent your intrusion into my class room.

MISS RILEY
Mr. Turner-

TURNER
Miss Riley, please!
(to Homer)
In the second place...this rocket of yours proves nothing. You've admitted to having lost several rockets, and you cannot prove conclusively that one of them didn't start the fire.

HOMER
Oh, yes I can.

Turner is surprised at Homer's confidence. Then Homer pulls out his rocket book and trig book. Turner smirks.

TURNER
Are we to conclude, Mr. Hickham, that since leaving school, you've become an expert not only in the field of rocket science but in trigonometry?

HOMER
I didn't say I was-

TURNER
Obviously you've learned far more
in the coal mines than you ever
did in high school.

The class has to laugh. Miss Riley burns and the rocket boys squirm. Turner is pleased with himself. Homer simply picks up a piece of chalk and calmly draws a simple diagram on the blackboard.

HOMER
The fire was near Welch, five
miles from Cape Coalwood. At the
time of that fire the best we
could do was one point two miles.
Which is exactly where I found
this rocket...See, Mr. Turner,
that rocket took 14 seconds from
this point to this one. According
to the equation in this book, that
means it flew to an altitude of
3,000 feet.

TURNER
(unimpressed)
And what equation might that be?

Homer knows it by heart. He writes it down.

HOMER
 S equals one half a t square where
 S is the altitude, a is the
gravity constant or 32, and t is
the time the rocket took to come
back down.

Turner is no longer smirking. Miss Riley and the kids are paying rapt attention. Quentin mutters:

QUENTIN
Get him, Homer...get him...

HOMER
According to this book, velocity
equals acceleration times time.
Since the acceleration of gravity
is 32 feet per second and the time
for our rocket to drop back to
earth was 14 seconds, the velocity
we reached was 14 times 32 or
around 448 feet per second. I'll
round that off to 450. Now then...

Turner is just staring.

HOMER

Are you following this, Mr. Turner?

TURNER

Um...

Homer is now playing for the class as he laughs and says:

HOMER

Mr. Turner! You must grasp the concept, or you will not be able to proceed! And if you cannot proceed, Mr. Turner, then you are lost. Lost! For all time, Mr. Turner! Lost...

The class erupts with laughter. Turner's had enough of this. He's sputtering as he shouts:

TURNER

I don't give a damn what your calculations prove. If you didn't start that fire than who did?

HOMER

I can't answer that one, Mr. Turner, but if you'll take us over to the State Troopers and ask them to show us the rocket that started the fire, you'll see for yourself that it wasn't ours. Please, Mr. Turner, it's only fair.

TURNER

Mr. Hickham-

MISS RILEY

(forcefully)

He's right, Mr. Turner. It's only fair.

She and Turner lock eyes. Miss Riley is not backing down.

INT. STATE TROOPER'S OFFICE - DAY

As a Trooper and Turner stand by, the boys study a rocket.

QUENTIN

Note how the fins are attached. Ingenious design, really. They're spring-loaded because they have to snap out when this device leaves its storage tube.

TURNER

What are you talking about? What storage tube?

QUENTIN

This isn't a rocket at all, it's an aeronautical flare.

Turner and the trooper both react.

TROOPER

What...

ROY LEE

Sonavabitch...that's exactly what it is...Look...

Roy Lee rushes to the area map on the nearby wall. He points.

ROY LEE

There's an airport in Welch. Just beside Davy mountain where your fire broke out. This flare must have fallen out of an airplane.

The trooper looks at the tube, snapping the fins closed and back open again. He looks at Turner. It's dawning on them that the smiling boys are right. As Turner looks at the grinning Homer, all he can come up with is:

TURNER

Hmm...

EXT. STATE TROOPER'S STATION - DAY

The boys and Turner watch as the troopers load the boys' rocket building supplies into the back of Turner's station wagon.

TURNER

(grimly)

There's no need to thank me. What's fair, is fair...

HOMER

Tell me, Mr. Turner, has Big Creek ever won a science fair?

TURNER

Not even so much as an honorable mention.

HOMER

Well, there'll be no honorable mention this time either. We're going all the way.

Turner is intrigued by the possibility.

INT. HOMER'S BASEMENT - DAY

Their newly returned rocket supplies are stacked up down here. The guys are excitedly going over their science fair plans. Homer shows them a diagram in the rocket book.

HOMER

Let's show those judges something they've never seen before.

QUENTIN

A Delaval nozzle. Interesting.

HOMER

(to Roy Lee)

Can you figure out how to draw this well enough so that Mr. Bolt can build it?

VOICE (O.S.)

Homer!

It's John Hickham, standing on the stairs and looking grim.

HOMER

Hi, dad...

As John descends the stairs, he sees the rocket supplies.

JOHN

What's this stuff doing here?

HOMER

The troopers gave it back to us.

The boys start talking at once.

O'DELL

Mr. Hickham, we didn't start that fire. It wasn't us.

ROY LEE

It wasn't even a rocket, it was a-

JOHN

(brusquely)

You all go on home.

O'Dell, Roy Lee and Quentin quickly depart the premises. Homer looks into his father's disappointed face.

JOHN
This the reason you skipped work today?

HOMER
Yes, sir.

JOHN
I thought all of this nonsense was behind you, Homer. I thought-

HOMER
It isn't nonsense.

JOHN
(barking)
I don't want to argue with you.

Homer knows he'd better keep his mouth shut. John cools down. Then he speaks his heart to Homer.

JOHN
Look, son... I can't even begin to tell you how proud of you I've been these past weeks. I mean, you've just been doing a hell of job in that mine. You keep going, and you're gonna have my job someday. Everybody says so. You got any idea how proud that would make me? Homer, that would make me even prouder than Jim playing football for the University of West Virginia.

John's eyes shine with pride.

HOMER
Dad...

JOHN
I guess what I'm saying is that if this rocket stuff is so important to you, then so be it. Long as you're careful, I guess, there's worse hobbies you could have...like collecting bugs or something. But skipping work, that's out of line, and you gotta know that. So let's go and get you right with Jake. Tell him that you'll work the hoot owl shift tonight.

John starts toward the stairs. Homer just stands there. Somehow he manages to speak the words:

HOMER

Dad, I don't want to go back to work in the coal mine.

JOHN

Homer-

HOMER

The coal mine's your life, it isn't mine. I want to go to the moon.

The look of betrayal on his father's face breaks Homer's heart. Then John Hickham heads up the stairs. Homer's lost his father, probably forever, and he knows it.

INT. WELCH HIGH SCHOOL GYMNASIUM - DAY

The place is packed with kids, parents and teachers standing beside various scientific displays which include everything from home-made t.v. sets to intricate burglar alarms.

Homer, the boys, Miss Riley and Mr. Turner stand nervously beside the boys' display table. The sign over their display says, "A Study of Amateur Rocketry Techniques." This consists of a folding backboard showing all the calculations for their rocket nozzle as well as diagrams showing how altitude was calculated. On the table itself, Wernher von Braun's autographed photograph sits in a place of honor right beside a gleaming and quite sophisticated-looking rocket nozzle.

The judges are announcing the winners.

JUDGE ONE

...and the second place red ribbon goes to...Roger Johnson of Welch High School for his electronic locking device. Congratulations, son.

The judge hands over the ribbon and shakes hands with the kid.

TURNER

(bitterly)

The judges are from Welch so naturally only the Welch kids win. This is a travesty...

JUDGE ONE

And now for the first place blue ribbon...The winners are Homer Hickham, Roy Lee Jones, Quentin Wilson and Michael O'Dell of Big Creek High for their ingenious display of Amateur Rocket Building Techniques.

The boys are too stunned to cheer. Miss Riley does it for them. A loud whoop of joy. She throws her arms around the boys, but the special smile she gives to Homer is for him alone.

TURNER

I knew we could do it.

EXT. PARKING LOT - DAY

Homer and the guys are loading their exhibit into the back of an old station wagon. They're on top of the world.

HOMER

Indianapolis here we come.

O'DELL

I've never even been outside this valley before.

ROY LEE

Who has?

Then Turner comes rushing over excitedly.

TURNER

Here's a good omen. I just learned that attending the Indianapolis science fair will be none other than Wernher von Braun.

The boys cheer. Homer has never been so happy.

TURNER

I've got to make travel arrangements so if you haven't already done so, you'd better decide which one of you will be representing the school.

The stunned boys follow Mr. Turner to his car.

HOMER

Are you saying that only one of us can go to Indianapolis?

TURNER

Surely, you can't expect the school to pay for all four of your expenses?

(gets into car)

Besides, how many of you does it take to stand at a table and answer a few questions?

Congratulations again.

Turner drives off. The boys just stand there.

ROY LEE
This really sucks...

The others all murmur their unhappy agreement. Then:

HOMER
I suppose we oughtta put it to
a vote.
(no response)
Okay, I'll go first. I vote for-

ROY LEE
Hold on, Homer. There's no need
to vote. You're the one that ought
to be going to Indianapolis.

The others nod. Homer is surprised.

HOMER
Me..?

O'DELL
When we first started shooting
off our rockets it was just about
having some fun. You're the only
one who ever thought it could lead
to anything.

ROY LEE
You got us started, and you kept
us going.

QUENTIN
Say hello to Wernher von Braun
for us.

Homer looks at his smiling friends. Profoundly moved.

INT. UNITED MINE WORKERS UNION HALL - NIGHT

A large gathering of angry and determined looking miners,
including Jake Mosby and others we've seen are gathered for a
meeting. The UNION OFFICIAL says:

OFFICIAL
All in favor of going out on
strike, say aye!

The response is deafening.

EXT. UNION HALL - NIGHT

The angry, determined miners come flooding out of the union
hall. Mr. Dantzler, others watch and shake their heads.

DANTZLER

Here we go again...

MONTAGE - THE STRIKE

1. AT THE MINE. Throngs of angry miners picketing the mine. John Hickham stands in the door of his office with some company officials, watching, scowling.

2. IN TOWN. Out of work coal miners are everywhere. They're especially thick around the company store. Dantzler comes outside to shoo them away, decides there's too many of them. He goes back inside.

3. PATH TO HICKHAM HOUSE. As John Hickham walks down the path, the picketing miners shout threats and curses. Some spit on the ground. John keeps walking, like they're not even there.

END MONTAGE

EXT. MINE ENTRANCE - NIGHT

The miner's are holding a torch-lit rally. Union officials take turns giving speeches. The huge crowd cheers them.

EXT. HOMER'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Jim Hickham stands on the porch, looking up toward the mine. He can hear the crowd cheering. He comes inside.

INT. HOMER'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Jim walks into the living room. Elsie is knitting, John is reading the newspaper.

JIM

They sure are getting themselves worked up...

JOHN

Let 'em...

JIM

Everybody's saying it's gonna be a long one.

John throws his paper down. Says angrily:

JOHN

If I have anything to say about it, you'd better believe it's going to be a long one. Ungrateful sons-of-bitches...

Now Homer walks in.

HOMER
Mom, have you seen the big green
suitcase?

ELSIE
You looked in the attic?

HOMER
Yes, ma'am.

ELSIE
Well, then...I don't know. John,
do you know where-

JOHN
(barking)
How the hell should I know where
the goddamned suitcase is?

And then-

BLAM! A shot is fired right through the window. The bullet goes
over John's head and lands in the wall. Elsie screams. John
heads for the door, shouting:

JOHN
Stay inside.

A squeal of tires can be heard as John flings open the door and
rushes outside. Elsie, Jim and Homer follow. They see an old
Dodge disappearing into the night.

JOHN
Earl Lee...

Jim rushes toward the Buick, shouting:

JIM
I'm gonna kill that sonavabitch.

John grabs hold of him.

JOHN
Don't be a fool.

ELSIE
(starts inside)
I'll call the constable.

JOHN
No! That fool constable's liable
to faint, we ask him to actually
do his job...

JIM
Well, what are we gonna do?

JOHN
Nothing. Earl Lee's a drunkard.
He couldn't hit the broad side
of a barn...

John Hickham starts back inside. The incredulous family follows him in.

INT. HICKHAM HOUSE - CONT

JIM
He tried to kill you.

HOMER
Yeah, dad, you can't just-

John gives Homer a withering stare.

JOHN
Don't trouble yourself, Homer.
You've got more important things
to worry about. Like finding your
suitcase.

John heads into the kitchen. Homer just stands there.

JIM
Forget it, Homer.

Homer almost lets it go, but he just can't. He follows his father into the kitchen.

INT. KITCHEN - NIGHT

John's opening a beer when Homer walks in.

HOMER
I'm sorry for what's going on
around here, but it isn't my
fault. What do you want from me?

JOHN
Watch yourself, Homer...

John sits down with his beer. Homer's not giving up.

HOMER
If I win at Indianapolis, I can
maybe go to college. Maybe even
get a job at Cape Canaveral.
Damn it, there's nothing for me
here. This town is dying. Open
up your eyes.

JOHN
(shouting)
You want to get out of here so
bad, then go. Go!

Something snaps inside of Homer. He shouts:

HOMER
When I go, I'll be gone forever.
I won't even look back.

Homer turns and walks out.

EXT. BUS TERMINAL - DAWN

Homer shakes hands with Roy Lee, Quentin and O'Dell. Then he gets on the Greyhound. The rocket boys watch as it pulls away. Homer waves to them through the window. Then they walk off.

EXT. INDIANAPOLIS FAIRGROUNDS - DAY

The enormous fairgrounds are in the heart of the downtown area. Homer stands with a group of about two hundred excited kids, who've just arrived. They're being addressed by MR. MORRIS.

MORRIS
...the fair will be open to the
public over the next two days and
on the following day, the judges
will arrive to select the winners.
Any questions?
(there are none)
Welcome to Indianapolis.

EXT. FAIRGROUNDS - LATER

The fair is under way. It's divided up according to the nature of the exhibit. There's an area for the biological displays, rocket propulsion displays, chemical displays, electronic displays, etc. The place is absolutely packed with people, and one of the more popular displays is Homer's, the centerpiece of which is the new and quite impressive Delaval rocket nozzle. The picture of von Braun is on the table beside some charts and graphs.

Homer addresses the crowd, who hang on his every word.

HOMER
I believe that we'll have a man
on the moon within the next ten
years or so, but that's only if
the government gives Mr. von Braun
and the space program all the
money and support they need.

Homer is having the time of this life.

EXT. STREETS OF DOWNTOWN INDIANAPOLIS - NIGHT

Homer and some of the kids from the science fair are walking, talking, enjoying the night. These kids are better dressed than Homer and to them, Indianapolis is nothing special, but to the boy from Coalwood, West Virginia, Indianapolis might just as well be New York City.

GIRL

The judges always go for the most expensive exhibits. That dork with the biosphere's going to win.

Some nod in agreement, but one boy, a future Ivy Leaguer says:

IVY LEAGUER

Well, my money's on Homer here. That rocket of yours is all anybody's talking about.

Homer can only smile.

EXT. FAIRGROUNDS - DAY

The fair hasn't opened yet. Homer is walking through the grounds, heading toward his display. But when he gets there, his blood runs cold. He just stands there for a moment, trying to absorb what he's seeing. Or not seeing. He looks around, but there's no sign of it. His rocket nozzle is gone.

INT. SECURITY OFFICE - DAY

Homer is in with the HEAD OF SECURITY.

SECURITY MAN

You aren't the only one. A lot of the displays got hit last night. Sorry about that. We can't be everywhere.

INT. ROY LEE'S HOUSE - DAY

Roy Lee's on the phone. Panicking.

ROY LEE

Jesus, Homer...what can we do?

EXT. PHONE BOOTH AT FAIRGROUNDS - DAY

Homer's trying to control his panic as he spits the story out.

HOMER

The nozzle's our whole exhibit. You've got to get Bolt to build us another one.

EXT. MINE ENTRANCE - DAY

Roy Lee has rounded up Quentin and O'Dell, they're talking to Bolt, who's on the picket line.

ROY LEE

So what do you say, Mr. Bolt?
You're our only hope.

INT. COMPANY STORE PHONE BOOTH - DAY

Roy Lee's on the phone. O'Dell and Quentin stand nearby. They all look devastated.

ROY LEE

There's union boys swarming around everywhere. He says he couldn't get within a hundred yards of the machine shop.

(no reply)

Homer?

INTERCUT - FAIRGROUNDS PHONE

Homer just stands there, feeling like his life is over. Finally, in a voice that is not very convincing:

HOMER

We can still win this thing.

From the other end comes Roy Lee's equally unconvincing voice:

ROY LEE (V.O.)

Sure, Homer.

There's a click at the other end. Homer hangs up.

EXT. FAIRGROUNDS - LATER

The science fair is once again in full swing. But Homer's display is deserted. Without the rocket nozzle, nobody's interested. Homer stands there alone with his charts and graphs and picture of Wernher von Braun.

INT. HICKHAM HOUSE - DAY

Somebody's knocking on the back door. Elsie walks in. She's surprised at who she sees. It's Mr. Bolt.

BOLT

Let me in, Elsie. Hurry.

She opens the door and Mr. Bolt rushes in. He closes the door.

BOLT

Those union guys would bust me up they see me here, but I just had to come. Elsie, Homer's in trouble.

EXT. HICKHAM HOUSE - DAY

Elsie marches out of the house and heads up the path toward the mine. The picketing miners make insulting cracks about her husband, but she pays them no heed.

INT. MINE OFFICE - DAY

Elsie and John are the only ones here.

JOHN

Elsie, you're crazy, I don't have the power to settle this strike.

ELSIE

The bosses listen to you. They'll do what you tell 'em. They'll-

JOHN

I am not gonna crawl on my belly before those miserable Union rats.

ELSIE

Is that what this is about, John? Is this about your pride?

Elsie's eyes are boring into him.

JOHN

It's about what's best for Coalwood. This mine doesn't produce then this town dies. You think the Union gives a good goddamn about that? They're just a bunch of greedy sons-of-bitches who don't-

ELSIE

Shut up, John! Just shut up!

John just stands there with his jaw open. He can't believe his wife has actually spoken to him this way.

ELSIE

Homer once said you loved the mine more than your own family. I stuck up for you 'cause I didn't want to believe it.

JOHN

Elsie-

ELSIE

But now I'm afraid I have no choice. Homer's gotten a lot of help from the people in this town. They've helped him build his rockets, and they've watched those rockets fly. But not you, John. You never showed up. Not even once...

John can no longer meet his wife's eyes and Elsie knows she's struck a nerve.

ELSIE

Now I'm not asking you to believe in him, to understand him...or even to love him if it isn't in your heart. But I am asking you to help him. He's your son. You have to do what's right. If you don't, I'll leave you, John.

John turns to look into his wife's eyes. She's not kidding.

JOHN

Elsie-

ELSIE

I'll wait tables, I'll take in wash...I'll do whatever I have to do to get away from here. Don't think I won't.

JOHN

Where would you go?

ELSIE

Myrtle Beach.

John almost smiles.

INT. UNION HALL - DAY

The place is packed with happy miners, lining up to shake hands with the owners. John Hickham stands with Jake Mosby.

JAKE

I guess we all know this isn't gonna fix things. At least not for long. But we know you did what you could for us.

(more)

JAKE (Cont'd)
(John nods)
Whole mining business is changing,
and ain't nothing ever gonna be
the same again.

He and John shake hands. Then to the nearby Bolt:

JOHN
Don't you have some work to do?

Bolt smiles shouts to some men.

BOLT
Let's go, boys, we've got us a
rocket to build.

INT. COMPANY STORE - NIGHT

A small crowd has gathered including Mr. Dantzler, Mr. Bolt,
some neighbors and, of course, the rocket boys. Elsie is on the
phone.

ELSIE
...it's packed and shipped and
on it's way. Be at the bus station
8 A.M.

INTERCUT - HOMER'S HOTEL ROOM

HOMER
(excited)
But, mom...how..?

ELSIE (V.O.)
Your father, Homer. It was your
father.

Homer is stunned. He can't believe it.

At the store, Dantzler shouts into phone:

DANTZLER
Give 'em hell, Homer.

The others in the crowd also begin to shout encouragement, "Go
get 'em." "You can do it," etc.

Homer hangs up the phone. Barely able to contain his excitement,
he rushes to the terrace. He looks out over the city of
Indianapolis and shouts at the top of his lungs:

HOMER
Yes!

EXT. FAIRGROUNDS - DAY

The last day of the State Science Fair, and it's jam packed. Homer stands before his display, discoursing on his gleaming new rocket nozzle before a team of JUDGES.

HOMER

...when rocket propellant burns, it produces a river of gas which flows into the convergent section of the nozzle. If the river continues through the throat at less than sonic speed - that is to say, less than the speed of sound - it becomes compacted in the divergent section, bound in turmoil, and inefficient. But if the gas-river reaches the speed of sound at the throat, then the gas flow in the divergent section will go supersonic.

The judges seem extremely impressed.

GERMAN JUDGE

This is easily is the best example of a DeLaval Nozzle that I have ever seen. Congratulations.

Homer takes note of the German accent. He interrupts.

HOMER

Excuse me, sir, but you're German, aren't you?

GERMAN JUDGE

(laughs)
How did you guess?

HOMER

Do you know Dr. von Braun?

GERMAN JUDGE

I am on his team at Cape Canaveral.

HOMER

I heard that Dr. Von Braun was going to be here today.

GERMAN JUDGE

As a matter of fact, when last I saw him he was over in the biological display area.

Homer cranes his neck, scouring the grounds. The judges smile.

HEAD JUDGE

We've seen enough. Go on, son.

Homer takes off like a shot.

EXT. BIOLOGICAL DISPLAY AREA - DAY

Homer has finally made it into this crowded area which is way on the other side of the fairgrounds. He's talking to the Ivy League kid from the other night.

IVY LEAGUER

He was very friendly. I shook his hand. You just missed him.

HOMER

Did he say where he was heading?

IVY LEAGUER

He said he was off to see the rocket propulsion displays.

(Homer reacts)

Hey, that's your-

And once again, Homer is off like a shot. The kid smiles.

IVY LEAGUER

Area...

ANGLE - HOMER'S DISPLAY

Two hands pick up the autographed photograph of Dr. Von Braun.
CAMERA PANS UP - It's Dr. Wernher von Braun.

ANGLE - HOMER

Trapped in the middle of a sea of people. Seems like millions of them. Homer wants to die.

EXT. ROCKET PROPULSION AREA - SHORT WHILE LATER

The disappointed and worn-out Homer is limping back into the propulsion area when fair director Morris rushes over.

MORRIS

Homer, where were you? Dr. Von Braun was looking for you.

HOMER

What!

MORRIS

He said that your nozzle design was just marvelous and he wanted to meet the boy who built it.

HOMER

He did..?

MORRIS

Then he picked up his photograph,
and said that maybe he had.

Homer's got a mile wide grin on his face. They start moving
through the crowd toward the display. But Mr. Morris isn't
finished.

MORRIS

Homer, that's not all...While you
were gone, the judges came back...

When Homer sees his display, his heart nearly stops. Lying
beside the nozzle is a gold medal.

MORRIS

You and your boys won the gold
medal for propulsion.

Then a voice from behind:

VOICE (O.S.)

Congratulations, Mr. Hickham.

Homer spins around, hoping it's von Braun. It's a well dressed
man with glasses, MR. WEBSTER. He holds out his hand.

WEBSTER

Tom Webster. Virginia State
College. If you could you spare
a moment, I'd like to discuss our
scholarship program.

HOMER

(stunned and happy)
Sure, I'd love to-

Before he knows it, TWO MORE MEN converge on him.

MAN ONE

Don't sign anything until you talk
to me Mr. Hickham. I'm Tom Palmer
from West Virginia Tech and we've
got the best science program in
the State of-

MAN TWO

Art Collins, Marshall College.
I believe that we can offer you-

Homer is surrounded. He's delighted. Amazed. And grateful.

EXT. BUS STATION - DAY

It seems like all of Coalwood has turned out to greet Homer, including his mom, Mr. Bolt, and of course, the rocket boys. Homer's holding up the gold medal and the crowd cheers. Then:

HOMER

To celebrate our victory, we're going to launch our last remaining rocket.

The crowd cheers. Roy Lee shouts:

ROY LEE

So if you want to see the greatest launch yet, be at Cape Coalwood at four o'clock.

As the crowd begins to disperse, Elsie comes over and puts her arm around Homer.

ELSIE

I'm so proud of you, son.

HOMER

Thanks, mom. I guess dad's not here, huh?

Elsie just sighs. Then Homer looks around.

HOMER

And where's Miss Riley?

Elsie and the rocket boys exchange looks. Homer's heart sinks.

INT. HOSPITAL - DAY

Homer walks slowly down the hospital corridor. Then he braces himself and walks into a room.

INT. MISS RILEY'S ROOM - DAY

HOMER

Hello, Miss Riley.

Miss Riley's lying on her hospital bed, looking very pale and tired. There's a tube leading into her arm. She smiles when she sees Homer. Her voice is faint and faraway.

MISS RILEY

Homer...Back from the fair. How did you do?

Homer's afraid to try to speak. He reaches into his pocket and produces the gold medal. Miss Riley beams.

MISS RILEY

You did it. I always knew you would...

HOMER

The Rocket Boys are going to college after all. We're going to get scholarships.

MISS RILEY

Homer, that's wonderful. Can I hold the medal?

Homer approaches her and places it in her hand. Now Homer's voice breaks along with his heart.

HOMER

It's yours, Miss Riley. We could never have won it without you.

MISS RILEY

(smiling)

No...Take it, Homer. You guys did this all yourselves.

Homer takes the medal. It's getting more difficult for Miss Riley to speak.

MISS RILEY

Hey, you know what..?

(Homer shakes his head)

Every school year from now on, I'm going to brag to my new students that I taught Homer Hickham and his rocket boys. They won't be able to shut me up. And maybe...maybe some time one of them will try to do what you guys did...and maybe...

Miss Riley's eyes are starting to close.

HOMER

Miss Riley?

A NURSE appears.

NURSE

She needs to rest.

Before he leaves, Homer says:

HOMER

Miss Riley, our last rocket's going up today at four o'clock. So you look out your window, okay?

MISS RILEY
I promise you, Homer...I'll be
watching...

She closes her eyes. Homer walks out of the room.

INT. BUICK - DAY

Homer's mother is driving him home. As they approach the house, they see John heading up the path toward the mine. Elsie honks the horn. John looks over. Sees Homer. He keeps walking.

HOMER
Let me out.

ELSIE
He can't help who he is, Homer.
If he wants to have hard feelings,
that's his problem, not yours.

Homer gets out of the car. Heads up the path.

INT. MINE OFFICE - DAY

John's surprised by Homer's sudden appearance.

HOMER
Hello, dad.

JOHN
(cooly)
Homer...

HOMER
I just wanted to tell you how much
I appreciate what you did for me.
I know it wasn't easy for you.
(holds up his medal)
So anyway...thank you.

John nods. Just barely. Homer tries again.

HOMER
We're shooting off our last rocket
at four o'clock. Since you've
never seen one go up before, I
thought maybe you might like to-

JOHN
I've got a lot of work.

HOMER
I just thought I'd ask.

John turns back to his work. Homer starts to leave. Then:

JOHN

Homer?

(Homer stops)

Did you get to meet your big hero?
Your Dr. Wernher von Braun?

Homer looks at his father. Shakes his head sadly.

HOMER

You don't get it, dad. You just
don't get it...

JOHN

What are you talking about?

HOMER

I know that you and me don't
exactly see eye to eye on certain
things. Hell, I guess we don't
see eye to eye on just about
anything. But, dad...I've come
to believe I've got in me to be
somebody in this world. And it's
not because I'm so different from
you either. It's because I'm just
the same. I can be just as hard
headed and just as tough. I only
hope that I can be as good a man
as you are. You've always come
through, dad. For the family,
for Coalwood...and for me. Sure,
Doctor Von Braun's a great
scientist...

(shakes his head)

...But he isn't my hero. You are.

John doesn't know what to say as Homer walks out of the office.

EXT. CAPE COALWOOD - DAY

Cape Coalwood is absolutely packed, and there's more people and
cars still arriving.. WE SEE Homer's brother and mother among
the crowd.

ANGLE - THE ROCKET

On it's launch pad. It's over six feet long, sleek and shiny.
We really get a sense of how far these kids have come since they
first started out. Homer and the boys stand nearby.

O'DELL

Our last rocket...

HOMER

Our last amateur rocket. We're
going to Cape Canaveral, remember?

Quentin thrusts his hand out and says:

QUENTIN
Cape Canaveral!

Roy Lee places his hand on top of Quentin's as he says:

ROY LEE
Cape Canaveral!

O'Dell, does the same. Homer goes last.

HOMER
Cape Canaveral!

The boys just stand there with their hands clasped together. Their bond is strong. They wish that it could last forever. Finally:

HOMER
Let's do it...

The guys nod, and as Homer heads toward the front of the crowd, who should come rushing over to him but Doris Ploss, looking prettier than ever.

DORIS
Hi, Homer.

HOMER
Doris...

DORIS
Congratulations on winning the science fair, it's got to be the most exciting thing that's ever happened around here. I was thinking, Homer, if you've got some time over the weekend, maybe you and I could-

But Homer just moves past her as he says:

HOMER
Excuse me, Doris...

Doris, not used to male rejection, just stands there, stunned. Homer keeps going, to the head of the crowd.

HOMER
Attention! Can I have your attention, please...

Everybody quiets down. All eyes on Homer.

HOMER

On behalf of the Rocket Boys and myself, we'd like to thank everybody, not just for coming out today, but...well, I guess, we'd like to thank you for just about everything. If it wasn't for the love and support of this town, we'd have given up a long time ago.

The crowd applauds. Elsie stands there, proud of her boy.

HOMER

Whatever we do, wherever we go, we're never going to forget that we came from Coalwood. And we'll always come home.

More applause. Louder this time.

HOMER

Since this is our final rocket, I'd like to dedicate it to some special people. I'd like to dedicate it to Ike Bykovski.

(applause)

To Mr. Bolt, who helped us so much...

A round of applause for the grinning Bolt.

HOMER

To our teacher, Miss Riley, for who's recovery we pray...And finally I'd like to dedicate this rocket to my mom and to my...

Homer stops. He can scarcely believe his eyes. Making his way to the front of the crowd is his father.

HOMER

...Dad.

A huge round of applause. John Hickham is touched. Ever so slightly, he nods to his son. Elsie is near tears. Then a man shouts from the crowd:

MAN

Come on, Homer, let's see it fly!

The crowd cheers. Homer smiles and nods. He walks to the launch pad where the smiling boys are waiting by the firing panel. Homer's about to press the button. But then he stops. Everybody watches as he walks over to his surprised father.

HOMER
You know, it won't fly unless
somebody lights the fuse...

JOHN
Huh?

HOMER
(smiles)
It's yours if you want it.

Now John Hickham smiles. He and Homer walk to the controls. The crowd counts down: Ten! Nine! Eight! Seven! Six! Five! Four! Three! Two! One! John Hickham presses the button. The rocket erupts with a mighty roar. The crowd cheers! John Hickham's never seen anything like this in his entire life. And he's thrilled to death! O'Dell shouts:

O'DELL
Look at it go, Homer! This one's
gonna go for miles!

And as the rocket climbs higher, WE SEE VARIOUS SHOTS:

1. Mr Dantzler standing with the out of work miners on the porch of his store, watching the rocket soar upward.
2. The doctor, standing with several patients in front of the small wooden clinic, watches the rocket. He shakes his head in wonder.
3. The reverend standing in front of his church, watching in awe, he murmurs:

REVEREND
Sweet Jesus...

4. And Miss Riley in her hospital bed. She can glimpse the rocket through the open window. She smiles. Now she can rest.

BACK TO CAPE COALWOOD

As they watch the rocket disappear together, John Hickham wordlessly puts his arm around his son.

DISSOLVE INTO:

A MODERN ROCKET LEAVING THE LAUNCHPAD

Could be Voyager.

INT. CAPE CANAVERAL CONTROL ROOM - DAY

A happy team of engineers watch the launch and congratulate each other. Then one man, a lanky engineer in his early fifties, says in a voice that's got a trace of West Virginia in it:

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124.

MAN

No matter how many times I see
it...it's the most beautiful sight
in the world.

CAMERA MOVES IN ON MAN'S DESK

WE SEE the name plate on the desk. It says, HOMER HICKHAM, Chief Engineer.

FADE OUT:

Across their pictures, we see the ON SCREEN TITLES

1. Homer, O'Dell, Roy Lee and Quentin all went on to college and received their degrees.
2. Homer's brother Jim graduated from college and became a gym teacher.
3. Miss Riley died of Hodgkins Disease.
4. John Hickham died of black lung disease in 1976.
5. Elsie Hickham retired to Myrtle Beach, South Carolina in 1979.
6. Homer Hickham works as a NASA engineer at the Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville, Alabama.

THE END