

A Blade of Grass, Ray Bradbury

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It had been decided already that Ultar was guilty. The members of the Council sat, luxuriously relaxing as the attendants lubricated and oiled their viselike hands and their slender metal joints.

Kront was most vehement of the seventeen. His steel hand snapped and his round gray visuals flamed red.

“He’s an insufferable experimentalist,” said Kront. “I recommend the Rust!”

“The Rust?” exclaimed Ome. “Isn’t that too drastic?”

Kront thrust his alloyed skull-case forward.

“No. Not for ones like him. He’ll undermine the entire Obot State before he’s finished.”

“Come now,” suggested Lione, philosophically. “It would be better to short-circuit him for a few years, as punishment. Why be so sadistic and bitter about it, Kront?”

“In the name of the Great Obot!” said Kront. “Don’t you see the danger? Experimenting with protoplasm!”

“I agree,” said one of the others. “Nothing is too severe a punishment. If Ultar insists on concluding his present experiments, he may undermine a civilization that has existed for three hundred thousand years. Take Ultar out to sea, unoiled, and fully aware. Drop him in.

It will take him many years to Rust, and he will be aware, all of those years, of crumbling and rusting. Be sure that his skull-case is intact, so his awareness will not be short-circuited by water.” The others trembled a quiet, metal, hidden trembling.

Kront swayed to his feet, his oblong face gleaming ice-blue and hard. "I want a show of opinion, a vote. The Rust for Ultar. Vote!"

There was an indecisive moment. Kront's fifteen feet of towering, alloyed metal shifted uneasily in the lubrication cell.

Vises came up, arms came up. Six at first. Then four more. Ome and five others declined to vote. Kront counted the vises with an instantaneous flare of his visuals.

"Good. There's an express rocket for Ultar's laboratory in one hundred seconds from Level CV. If we hurry we'll make it!"

Huge, magnetic plates clung to the floor as metal bodies heaved upward with oiled quiet.

They hurried to a wide portal. Ome and the five dissenters followed. He stopped Kront at the portal. "There's a thing I want to ask you, Kront."

"Hurry. We haven't time."

"You've—seen it."

"Protoplasm?"

"Yes. You've looked at it?"

Kront nodded. "Yes. I have seen."

Ome said, "What is it like?"

Kront did not answer for a long moment and then he said, very slowly.

"It is enough to freeze the motion of all Obot Things. It is horror. It is unbelievable. I think you had better come and see this for yourself."

Ome deliberated. "I'll come."

"Hurry then. We have fifty seconds."

They followed the others.

The sea lay quietly as a huge, pallidly relaxed hand. In the vein and artery of that vast hand nothing moved but the gray blood tides.

Moved silently and with the motion of one lunar tide against another.

The deeps were not stirred by any other thing. The sea was lifeless and clear of any gill or eye or fin or any moving thing save the soft sea dust which arose, filtering, when the tides changed. The sea was dead.

The forests were silent. The brush was naked, the trees high and forlorn in a wilderness of quiet. There were no bird songs, or cracklings of sly animal paws in autumnal leaves, there were no loon cries or far off calls of moose or chipmunk.

Only the wind sang little songs of memory it had learned three hundred thousand years before from things called birds. The forest and the land under the forest was dead. The trees were dead, turned to stone, upright, shading the hard stony soil forever. There was no grass and no flowers. The land was dead, as dead as the sea.

Now, over the dead land, in the birdless sky, came a metal sound. The sound of a rocket singing in the dead air.

Then it was gone, leaving a vein of pale gold powder in its wake. Kront and his fellows, on their way to the fortress of Ultar. . . .

A door opened as the ship landed. Kront and the others came forth from the ship.

“I’ve been waiting for you,” said Ultar, standing in the open portal of the laboratory. “I knew you’d bring the Council with you, Kront. Step in, all of you. I can tell by the immediate temperature of your bodies, that I am already condemned to Rust. We shall see. Step in, anyway.”

The door rang shut behind the Council. Ultar led the way down a tubular hall which issued forth into a dark room.

“Be seated, Obot Rulers. It is an unusual thing, this reception for the Great. I am flattered.”

Kront clicked angrily. “Before you die, you must show us this protoplasm, so it can be judged and destroyed.”

“Must I? Must you? Must it?”

“Where is it?”

“Here.”

“Where!”

“Patience, Kront.”

“I’ve no patience with blasphemers!”

“That is apparent.”

In one corner of the room was a large square box, from which a glow illuminated the nearby walls. Over the box hung a yellow cloth which hid the contents from view.

Ultrar, with a certain sure sense of the dramatic, moved to this box and made several adjustments of heat-dials. His visuals were glowing. Grasping the yellow cloth, he lifted it up and away from the box.

A hard, rattling tremor passed through the group. Visuals blinked and changed color. Bodies made an uneasy whining of metal. What lay before them was not pleasant.

They drifted forward until they circled the box and peered into it. What they saw was blasphemous and sacrilegious and more than horrible.

Something that grew.

Something that expanded and built upon itself, changed and reproduced. Something that actually lived and died.

Died.

How silly! No one need die, ever, ever!

Something that could rot away into nothingness and run blood and be tortured. Something that felt and could be burned or hurt or made to feel hot or cold. Silly, silly something, horrid, horrid something, all incomprehensible and nightmarish and unpredictable!

Pink flesh formed six feet tall with long, long fleshy arms and flesh hands and two long flesh legs. And—they remembered from myth-dreams—those two unnecessary things—a mouth and nose! Ome felt the silent coggerly within himself grind slow.

It was unbelievable! Like the half-heard myths of an Age of Flesh and Darkness. All those little half-truths, rumors, those dim little mutterings and whispers of creatures that grew instead of being built!

Who ever heard of such blasphemy? To grow instead of being built? How could a thing be perfect unless it was built and tendered every aid to perfection by an Obot scientist? This fleshy pulp was imperfect. The least jar and it broke, the least heat and it melted, the least cold and it froze. And as for the amazing fact that it grew, well, what of that? It was only luck that it grew to be anything. Sheer luck.

Not so the inhabitants of the Obot State! They were perfect to begin with and grew, paradoxically, more perfect as time progressed. It was nothing, nothing at all for them to exist one hundred thousand years, two hundred thousand years. Ome himself was past thirty-thousand, a youth, still a youth!

But—flesh? Depending upon the whims of some cosmic Nature to give it intellect, health, longevity? How silly a joke, how pointless, when it could be installed in parcels and packages, in wheels and cogs and red and blue wires and sparkling currents!

“Here it is,” said Ultar, simply, and with pride. He said it with a firmness that was unafraid. “A body of bone and flesh and blood and fantasy.” There was a long silence in which the metal whining did not cease among the stricken Council. There was hardly a flicker of movement among them. They stared.

Ome said, “It is frightening. Where did you get it?”
“I made it.”

“How could you bring yourself to think of it?”

“It is hard to say. It was long ago. Ten thousand years ago, when I was walking over the stony forests, alone, one day, as I have often done, I found a blade of grass. Yes, one last small blade of green grass, the last one in all of this world.

You can’t imagine how unbearably excited I was. I held it up and I examined it and it was a small green miracle. I felt as if I might explode into a million bits. I took the grass blade home with me, carefully, and telling no one. Oh, what a beautiful treasure it was.”

“That was a direct violation of the law,” said Kront.

“Yes, the law,” said Ultar remembering. “Three hundred thousand years ago when we burned the birds in the air, like cinders, and killed the foxes and the snakes in their burrows, and killed fish in the sea, and all animals, including man—”

“Forbidden names!”

“Remembered names, nevertheless. Remembered. And then we saw the forests still grew and reminded us of growing things, so we turned the forests to stone, and killed the grass and flowers, and we’ve lived on a barren stony world ever since. Why, we even destroyed the microbes that we couldn’t see, that’s how afraid we were of growing things!”

Kront rasped out, “We weren’t afraid!”

“Weren’t we? Never mind. Let me complete my story. We shot the birds from the sky, sprayed insects from the air, killed the flowers and grass, but yet one small blade survived and I found it and brought it here, and nurtured it, and it grew for hundreds of years until it was ten million blades of grass which I studied because it had cells that grew. I cannot tell you with what excitement I greeted the blossoming of the first flower.”

“Flower!”

“A little thing. A blue flower, after a thousand years of experiment. And from that flower more flowers, and from those flowers, five centuries

later, a bush, and from that bush, four hundred years later, a tree. Oh, it's been a strange long time of working and watching, I'll tell you."
"But this," cried Kront. "How did it evolve to this?"

"I went looking. I scoured the world. If I found one precious blade of grass, I reasoned, then perhaps I can find another thing, a lizard that had escaped, or a snake, or some such thing. I was more than lucky. I found a small monkey. From there to this is another thousand years and more. Artificial breeding, insemination, a study of genes and cells, well, it is here now, and it is good."

"It is forbidden!"

"Yes. Damnably forbidden. Look, Ome, do you know why flesh was eradicated from the Earth?"

Ome deliberated. "Because it threatened Obot Rule."

"How did it threaten it?"

"With the Rust."

"With more than the Rust," replied Ultar, quietly. "Flesh threatened us with another way of life and thought. It threatened us with delightful imperfection, unpredictability, art, and literature, and we slaughtered flesh and made it blasphemy and forbidden to see flesh or speak of it."

"Liar!"

"Am I?" demanded Ultar. "Who owned the world before us?"

"We've always owned it. Always."

"What about flesh? Explain it?"

"It was an experiment that got away from us for a time. Some insane Obot scientist created monster flesh and it bred, and it was the servant of the Obots, and it overthrew Obot Rule for a time. Finally, the Obots had to destroy it."

"Religious dogmatism!" replied Ultar. "You've been taught to think that. But, know the truth. There must've been a Beginning, do you agree?"

“Yes. There was a Beginning. The Book of Metal says that all the Universe was turned out on one Lathe of one Huge Machine. And we the small Obots of that Lathe and that Machine.”

“There had to be a first Obot, did there not?”

“Yes.”

“And who built him?”

“Another machine.”

“But before that, at the very beginning? Who built the machine that built the Obot? I’ll tell you. Flesh. Flesh built the first machine. Flesh once ruled this continent and all continents. Because flesh grows. Machines do not grow. They are made piece by piece—they are built. It took a growing creature to build them!”

Ome went wild. “No, no. That is a terrible thought!”

“Listen,” said Ultar. “We could not stand man and his imperfect ways. We thought him silly and ridiculous with his art and music. He could die. We could not. So we destroyed him because he was in the way, he cluttered up our perfect universe.

And then, we had to lie to ourselves. In our own way we are colossally vain. Just as man fashioned God in his own image, so we had to fashion our God in our image. We couldn’t stand the thought of Man being our God, so we eradicated every vestige of protoplasm on Earth, and forbade speaking of it. We were Machines, made by Machines, that was the All, and the Truth.”

He was finished with his speaking. The others looked at him, and at last Kront said, “Why did you do it? Why have you made this thing of flesh and imperfection?”

“Why?” Ultar turned to the box. “Look at him, this creature, this man, so small, so vulnerable. His life is worth something because of his very vulnerability. Out of his fear and terror and uncertainty he once created great art, great music and great literature. Do we? We do not.

“How can a civilization create when it lives forever and nothing is of value? Things only take value from their evanescence, things are only appreciated because they vanish. How beautiful a summer day is that is only one of a kind; you all have seen such days—one of the few things of beauty that we know, the weather, which changes. We do not change, therefore there is no beauty and no art.

“See him here, in his box, dreaming, about to wake. Little frightened man, on the edge of death, but writing fine books to live long after. I’ve seen those books in forbidden libraries, full of love and tenderness and terror.

And what was his music but a proclamation against the uncertainty of living and the sureness of death and dissolution? What perfect things came from such imperfect creatures. They were sublimely delicate and sublimely wrong, and they waged wars and did many bad things, which we, in our perfectness cannot understand.

“We cannot understand death, really, for it is so rare among us, and has no value. But this man knows death and beauty and for that reason I created him so that some of the beauty and uncertainty would return to the world. Only then could life have any meaning to me, little as I can appreciate it with my limited faculties.

“He had the pleasure of pain, yes, even pain a pleasure, in its own way, for it is feeling and being alive; he lived, and he ate, which we do not do, and knew the goodness of love and raising others like himself and he knew a thing called sleep, and in those sleepings he dreamed, a thing we never do, and here he is now, dreaming fine things we could never hope to know or understand. And you are here, afraid of him and afraid of beauty and meaning and value.”

The others stiffened. Kront turned to them and said, “Listen, all of you. You will say nothing of what you’ve seen today, you will tell no one. Understand?”

The others swayed and moaned in a dazed, wavering anger.

The sleeper in the long oblong box stirred, fitfully, the eyelids quivered, the lips moved. The man was waking.

“The Rust!” screamed Kront, rushing forward. “Seize Ultar! The Rust! The Rust!”

The End