

Almost the End of the World, Ray Bradbury

Almost the End of the World

Sighting rock junction, arizona, at noon on August 22, 1967, Willy Bersinger let his miner's boot rest easy on the jalopy's accelerator and talked quietly to his partner, Samuel Fitts.

"Yes, sir, Samuel, it's great hitting town.

After a couple of months out at the Penny Dreadful Mine, a jukebox looks like a stained-glass window to me. We need the town; without it, we might wake some morning and find ourselves all jerked beef and petrified rock. And then, of course, the town needs us, too."

"How's that?" asked Samuel Fitts.

"Well, we bring things into town that it hasn't got—mountains, creeks, desert night, stars, things like that . . ."

And it was true, thought Willy, driving along. Set a man 'way out in the strange lands and he fills with wellsprings of silence. Silence of sagebrush, or a mountain lion purring like a warm beehive at noon. Silence of the river shallows deep in the canyons. All this a man takes in. Opening his mouth, in town, he breathes it out.

"Oh, how I love to climb into that old barbershop chair," Willy admitted, "and see all those city men lined up under the naked-lady calendars, staring back at me, waiting while I chew over my philosophy of rocks and mirages and the kind of Time that just sits out there in the hills waiting for man to go away.

I exhale—and that wilderness settles in a fine dust on the customers. Oh, it's nice, me talking, soft and easy, up and down, on and on . . ."

In his mind he saw the customers' eyes strike fire. Someday they would yell and rabbit for the hills, leaving families and time-clock civilization behind.

"It's good to feel wanted," said Willy. "You and me, Samuel, are basic necessities for those city-dwelling folks. Gangway, Rock Junction!" And with a tremulous tin whistling they steamed across city limits into awe and wonder.

They had driven perhaps a hundred feet through town when Willy kicked the brakes. A great shower of rust flakes sifted from the jalopy fenders. The car stood cowering in the road.

"Something's wrong," said Willy. He squinted his lynx eyes this way and that. He snuffed his huge nose. "You feel it? You smell it?"

"Sure," said Samuel, uneasily, "but what?"

Willy scowled. "You ever see a sky-blue cigar-store Indian?"
"Never did."

"There's one over there. Ever see a pink dog kennel, an orange outhouse, a lilac-colored birdbath? There, there, and over there!" Both men had risen slowly now to stand on the creaking floorboards.

"Samuel," whispered Willy, "the whole damn shooting match, every kindling pile, porch rail, gewgaw gingerbread, fence, fireplug, garbage truck, the whole blasted town, look at it! It was painted just an hour ago!"

"No!" said Samuel Fitts.

But there stood the band pavilion, the Baptist church, the firehouse, the Oddfellows' orphanage, the railroad depot, the county jail, the cat hospital and all the bungalows, cottages, greenhouses, gazebos, shop signs, mailboxes, telephone poles and trashbins, around and in between, and they all blazed with corn yellow, crab-apple greens, circus

reds. From water tank to tabernacle, each building looked as if God had jigsawed it, colored it and set it out to dry a moment ago.

Not only that, but where weeds had always been, now cabbages, green onions, and lettuce crammed every yard, crowds of curious sunflowers clocked the noon sky, and pansies lay under unnumbered trees cool as summer puppies, their great damp eyes peering over rolled lawns mint-green as Irish travel posters. To top it all, ten boys, faces scrubbed, hair brilliantined, shirts, pants and tennis shoes clean as chunks of snow, raced by.

“The town,” said Willy, watching them run, “has gone mad. Mystery. Mystery everywhere. Samuel, what kind of tyrant’s come to power? What law was passed that keeps boys clean, drives people to paint every toothpick, every geranium pot?”

Smell that smell? There’s fresh wallpaper in all those houses! Doom in some horrible shape has tried and tested these people. Human nature doesn’t just get this picky perfect overnight. I’ll bet all the gold I panned last month those attics, those cellars are cleaned out, all shipshape. I’ll bet you a real Thing fell on this town.”

“Why, I can almost hear the cherubim singing in the Garden,” Samuel protested. “How you figure Doom? Shake my hand, put ’er there. I’ll bet and take your money!”

The jalopy swerved around a corner through a wind that smelled of turpentine and whitewash. Samuel threw out a gum wrapper, snorting. He was somewhat surprised at what happened next. An old man in new overalls, with mirror-bright shoes, ran out into the street, grabbed the crumpled gum wrapper and shook his fist after the departing jalopy.

“Doom . . .” Samuel Fitts looked back, his voice fading. “Well, . . .the bet still stands.”

They opened the door upon a barbershop teeming with customers whose hair had already been cut and oiled, whose faces were shaved

close and pink, yet who sat waiting to vault back into the chairs where three barbers flourished their shears and combs. A stock-market uproar filled the room as customers and barbers all talked at once.

When Willy and Samuel entered, the uproar ceased instantly. It was as if they had fired a shotgun blast through the door.

“Sam . . .Willy . . .”

In the silence some of the sitting men stood up and some of the standing men sat down, slowly, staring.

“Samuel,” said Willy out of the corner of his mouth, “I feel like the Red Death standing here.” Aloud he said, “Howdy! Here I am to finish my lecture on the Interesting Flora and Fauna of the Great American Desert, and—”

“No!”

Antonelli, the head barber, rushed frantically at Willy, seized his arm, clapped his hand over Willy’s mouth like a snuffer on a candle. “Willy,” he whispered, looking apprehensively over his shoulder at his customers. “Promise me one thing: buy a needle and thread, sew up your lips. Silence, man, if you value your life!”

Willy and Samuel felt themselves hurried forward. Two already neat customers leaped out of the barber chairs without being asked. As they stepped into the chairs, the two miners glimpsed their own images in the flyspecked mirror.

“Samuel, there we are! Look! Compare!”

“Why,” said Samuel, blinking, “we’re the only men in all Rock Junction who really need a shave and a haircut.”

“Strangers!” Antonelli laid them out in the chairs as if to anesthetize them quickly. “You don’t know what strangers you are!”

“Why, we’ve only been gone a couple of months—” A steaming towel inundated Willy’s face; he subsided with muffled cries. In steaming darkness he heard Antonelli’s low and urgent voice.

“We’ll fix you to look like everyone else. Not that the way you look is dangerous, no, but the kind of talk you miners talk might upset folks at a time like this.”

“Time like this, hell!” Willy lifted the seething towel. One bleary eye fixed Antonelli. “What’s wrong with Rock Junction?”

“Not just Rock Junction.” Antonelli gazed off at some incredible dream beyond the horizon. “Phoenix, Tucson, Denver. All the cities in America! My wife and I are going as tourists to Chicago next week.

Imagine Chicago all painted and clean and new. The Pearl of the Orient, they call it! Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Buffalo, the same! All because—well, get up now, walk over and switch on that television set against the wall.”

Willy handed Antonelli the steaming towel, walked over, switched on the television set, listened to it hum, fiddled with the dials and waited. White snow drifted down the screen.

“Try the radio now,” said Antonelli.

Willy felt everyone watch as he twisted the radio dial from station to station.

“Hell,” he said at last, “both your television and radio are broken.”

“No,” said Antonelli simply.

Willy lay back down in the chair and closed his eyes.

Antonelli leaned forward, breathing hard.

“Listen,” he said.

“Imagine four weeks ago, a late Saturday morning, women and children staring at clowns and magicians on TV. In beauty shops, women staring

at TV fashions. In the barbershop and hardware stores, men staring at baseball or trout fishing. Everybody everywhere in the civilized world staring. No sound, no motion, except on the little black-and-white screens.

“And then, in the middle of all that staring . . .”

Antonelli paused to lift up one corner of the broiling cloth.

“Sunspots on the sun,” he said.

Willy stiffened.

“Biggest damn sunspots in the history of mortal man,” said Antonelli.

“Whole damn world flooded with electricity. Wiped every TV screen clean as a whistle, leaving nothing, and, after that, more nothing.”

His voice was remote as the voice of a man describing an arctic landscape. He lathered Willy’s face, not looking at what he was doing. Willy peered across the barbershop at the soft snow falling down and down that humming screen in an eternal winter. He could almost hear the rabbit thumping of all the hearts in the shop.

Antonelli continued his funeral oration.

“It took us all that first day to realize what had happened. Two hours after that first sunspot storm hit, every TV repairman in the United States was on the road. Everyone figured it was just their own set.

With the radios conked out, too, it was only that night, when newsboys, like in the old days, ran headlines through the streets, that we got the shock about the sunspots maybe going on—for the rest of our lives!”

The customers murmured.

Antonelli’s hand, holding the razor, shook. He had to wait.

“All that blankness, that empty stuff falling down, falling down inside our television sets, oh, I tell you, it gave everyone the willies. It was like a good friend who talks to you in your front room and suddenly shuts

up and lies there, pale, and you know he's dead and you begin to turn cold yourself.

"That first night, there was a run on the town's movie houses. Films weren't much, but it was like the Oddfellows' Ball downtown till midnight. Drugstores fizzed up two hundred vanilla, three hundred chocolate sodas that first night of the Calamity. But you can't buy movies and sodas every night. What then? Phone your in-laws for canasta or Parcheesi?"

"Might as well," observed Willy, "blow your brains out."

"Sure, but people had to get out of their haunted houses. Walking through their parlors was like whistling past a graveyard. All that silence . . ."

Willy sat up a little. "Speaking of silence—"

"On the third night," said Antonelli quickly, "we were all still in shock. We were saved from outright lunacy by one woman. Somewhere in this town this woman strolled out of the house, and came back a minute later. In one hand she held a paintbrush. And in the other—"

"A bucket of paint," said Willy.

Everyone smiled, seeing how well he understood.

"If those psychologists ever strike off gold medals, they should pin one on that woman and every woman like her in every little town who saved our world from coming to an end. Those women who instinctively wandered in at twilight and brought us the miracle cure."

Willy imagined it. There were the glaring fathers and the scowling sons slumped by their dead TV sets waiting for the damn things to shout Ball One, or Strike Two! And then they looked up from their wake and there in the twilight saw the fair women of great purpose and dignity standing and waiting with brushes and paint. And a glorious light kindled their cheeks and eyes. . . .

“Lord, it spread like wildfire!” said Antonelli. “House to house, city to city. Jigsaw-puzzle craze, 1932, yo-yo craze, 1928, were nothing compared with the Everybody Do Everything Craze that blew this town to smithereens and glued it back again.

Men everywhere slapped paint on anything that stood still ten seconds; men everywhere climbed steeples, straddled fences, fell off roofs and ladders by the hundreds.

Women painted cupboards, closets; kids painted Tinkertoys, wagons, kites. If they hadn’t kept busy, you could have built a wall around this town, renamed it Babbling Brooks.

All towns, everywhere, the same, where people had forgotten how to waggle their jaws, make their own talk. I tell you, men were moving in mindless circles, dazed, until their wives shoved a brush into their hands and pointed them toward the nearest unpainted wall!”

“Looks like you finished the job,” said Willy.

“Paint stores ran out of paint three times the first week.” Antonelli surveyed the town with pride. “The painting could only last so long, of course, unless you start painting hedges and spraying grass blades one by one.

Now that the attics and cellars are cleaned out, too, our fire is seeping off into, well, women canning fruit again, making tomato pickles, raspberry, strawberry preserves. Basement shelves are loaded.

Big church doings, too. Organized bowling, night donkey baseball, box socials, beer busts. Music shop sold five hundred ukeleles, two hundred and twelve steel guitars, four hundred and sixty ocarinas and kazoos in four weeks. I’m studying trombone. Mac, there, the flute.

Band Concerts Thursday and Sunday nights. Hand-crank ice-cream machines? Bert Tyson’s sold two hundred last week alone. Twenty-eight days, Willie, Twenty-eights Days That Shook the World!”

Willy Bersinger and Samuel Fitts sat there, trying to imagine and feel the shock, the crushing blow.

“Twenty-eight days, the barbershop jammed with men getting shaved twice a day so they can sit and stare at customers like they might say something,” said Antonelli, shaving Willy now. “Once, remember, before TV, barbers were supposed to be great talkers.

Well, this month it took us one whole week to warm up, get the rust out. Now we’re spouting fourteen to the dozen. No quality, but our quantity is ferocious. When you came in you heard the commotion. Oh, it’ll simmer down when we get used to the great Oblivion.”

“Is that what everyone calls it?”

“It sure looked that way to most of us, there for a while.”

Willy Bersinger laughed quietly and shook his head. “Now I know why you didn’t want me to start lecturing when I walked in that door.”

Of course, thought Willy, why didn’t I see it right off? Four short weeks ago the wilderness fell on this town and shook it good and scared it plenty. Because of the sunspots, all the towns in all the Western world have had enough silence to last them ten years.

And here I come by with another dose of silence, my easy talk about deserts and nights with no moon and only stars and just the little sound of the sand blowing along the empty river bottoms. No telling what might have happened if Antonelli hadn’t shut me up. I see me, tarred and feathered, leaving town.

“Antonelli,” he said aloud. “Thanks.”

“For nothing,” said Antonelli. He picked up his comb and shears. “Now, short on the sides, long in back?”

“Long on the sides,” said Willy Bersinger, closing his eyes again, “short in back.”

An hour later Willy and Samuel climbed back into their jalopy, which someone, they never knew who, had washed and polished while they were in the barbershop.

“Doom.” Samuel handed over a small sack of gold dust. “With a capital D.”

“Keep it.” Willy sat, thoughtful, behind the wheel. “Let’s take this money and hit out for Phoenix, Tucson, Kansas City, why not? Right now we’re a surplus commodity around here. We won’t be welcome again until those little sets begin to herringbone and dance and sing.

Sure as hell, if we stay, we’ll open our traps and the gila monsters and chicken hawks and the wilderness will slip out and make us trouble.”

Willy squinted at the highway straight ahead.

“Pearl of the Orient, that’s what he said. Can you imagine that dirty old town, Chicago, all painted up fresh and new as a babe in the morning light? We just got to go see Chicago, by God!”

He started the car, let it idle, and looked at the town.

“Man survives,” he murmured. “Man endures. Too bad we missed the big change. It must have been a fierce thing, a time of trials and testings. Samuel, I don’t recall, do you? What have we ever seen on TV?”

“Saw a woman wrestle a bear two falls out of three, one night.”

“Who won?”

“Damned if I know. She—”

But then the jalopy moved and took Willy Bersinger and Samuel Fitts with it, their hair cut, oiled and neat on their sweet-smelling skulls, their cheeks pink-shaven, their fingernails flashing the sun.

They sailed under clipped green, fresh-watered trees, through flowered lanes, past daffodil-, lilac-, violet-, rose- and peppermint-colored houses on the dustless road.

“Pearl of the Orient, here we come!”

A perfumed dog with permanented hair ran out, nipped their tires and barked, until they were gone away and completely out of sight.

The End