



Any Friend of Nicholas Nickleby's Is a Friend of Mine, Ray Bradbury

Any Friend of Nicholas Nickleby's Is a Friend of Mine

Imagine a summer that would never end.

Nineteen twenty-nine.

Imagine a boy who would never grow up.

Me.

Imagine a barber who was never young.

Mr. Wyneski.

Imagine a dog that would live forever.

Mine.

Imagine a small town, the kind that isn't lived in anymore.

Ready? Begin . . .

Green Town, Illinois . . . Late June.

Dog barking outside a one-chair barbershop.

Inside, Mr. Wyneski, circling his victim, a customer snoozing in the steambath drowse of noon.

Inside, me, Ralph Spaulding, a boy of some twelve years, standing still as an iron Civil War statue, listening to the hot wind, feeling all that hot summer dust out there, a bakery world where nobody could be bad or good, boys just lay gummed to dogs, dogs used boys for pillows under trees that lazed with leaves which whispered in despair: Nothing Will Ever Happen Again.

The only motion anywhere was the cool water dripping from the huge coffin-sized ice block in the hardware store window.

The only cool person in miles was Miss Frostbite, the traveling magician's assistant, tucked into that lady-shaped long cavity hollowed in the ice block displayed for three days now without, they said, her breathing, eating, or talking. That last, I thought, must have been terrible hard on a woman.

Nothing moved in the street but the barbershop striped pole which turned slowly to show its red, white, and then red again, slid up out of nowhere to vanish nowhere, a motion between two mysteries.

“... hey ...”

I pricked my ears.

“... something’s coming ...”

“Only the noon train, Ralph.” Mr. Wyneski snicked his jackdaw scissors, peering in his customer’s ear. “Only the train that comes at noon.”

“No ...” I gasped, eyes shut, leaning. “Something’s really coming ...”

I heard the far whistle wail, lonesome, sad, enough to pull your soul out of your body.

“You feel it, don’t you, Dog?”

Dog barked.

Mr. Wyneski sniffed. “What can a dog feel?”

“Big things. Important things. Circumstantial coincidences. Collisions you can’t escape. Dog says. I say. We say.”

“That makes four of you. Some team.” Mr. Wyneski turned from the summer-dead man in the white porcelain chair. “Now, Ralph, my problem is hair. Sweep.”

I swept a ton of hair. “Gosh, you’d think this stuff just grew up out of the floor.”

Mr. Wyneski watched my broom. “Right! I didn’t cut all that. Darn stuff just grows, I swear, lying there. Leave it a week, come back, and you need hip boots to trod a path.” He pointed with his scissors. “Look. You ever see so many shades, hues, and tints of forelocks and chin fuzz? There’s Mr. Tompkins’s receding hairline. There’s Charlie Smith’s topknot. And here, here’s all that’s left of Mr. Harry Joe Flynn.”

I stared at Mr. Wyneski as if he had just read from Revelation. “Gosh, Mr. Wyneski, I guess you know everything in the world!”

“Just about.”

“I—I’m going to grow up and be—a barber!”

Mr. Wyneski, to hide his pleasure, got busy.

“Then watch this hedgehog, Ralph, peel an eye. Elbows thus, wrists so! Make the scissors talk! Customers appreciate. Sound twice as busy as you are. Snickety-snick, boy, snickety-snick. Learned this from the

French! Oh, yes, the French! They do prowl about the chair light on their toes, and the sharp scissors whispering and nibbling, Ralph, nibbling and whispering, you hear!”

“Boy!” I said, at his elbow, right in with the whispers and nibbles, then stopped: for the wind blew a wail way off in summer country, so sad, so strange.

“There it is again. The train. And something on the train . . .”

“Noon train don’t stop here.”

“But I got this feeling—”

“The hair’s going to grab me, Ralph . . .”

I swept hair.

After a long while I said, “I’m thinking of changing my name.”

Mr. Wyneski sighed. The summer-dead customer stayed dead.

“What’s wrong with you today, boy?”

“It’s not me. It’s the name is out of hand. Just listen. Ralph.” I grrred it.

“Rrrralph.”

“Ain’t exactly harp music . . .”

“Sounds like a mad dog.” I caught myself.

“No offense, Dog.”

Mr. Wyneski glanced down. “He seems pretty calm about the whole subject.”

“Ralph’s dumb. Gonna change my name by tonight.”

Mr. Wyneski mused. “Julius for Caesar? Alexander for the Great?”

“Don’t care what. Help me, huh, Mr. Wyneski? Find me a name . . .”

Dog sat up. I dropped the broom.

For way down in the hot cinder railroad yards a train furnaced itself in, all pomp, all fire-blast shout and tidal churn, summer in its iron belly bigger than the summer outside.

“Here it comes!”

“There it goes,” said Mr. Wyneski.

“No, there it doesn’t go!”

It was Mr. Wyneski’s turn to almost drop his scissors.

“Goshen. Darn noon train’s putting on the brakes!”

We heard the train stop.

“How many people getting off the train, Dog?”

Dog barked once.

Mr. Wyneski shifted uneasily. “U.S. Mail bags—”

“No . . . a man! Walking light. Not much luggage. Heading for our house. A new boarder at Grandma’s, I bet. And he’ll take the empty room right next to you, Mr. Wyneski! Right, Dog?”

Dog barked.

“That dog talks too much,” said Mr. Wyneski.

“I just gotta go see, Mr. Wyneski. Please?”

The far footsteps faded in the hot and silent streets.

Mr. Wyneski shivered.

“A goose just stepped on my grave.”

Then he added, almost sadly:

“Get along, Ralph.”

“Name ain’t Ralph.”

“Whatchamacallit . . . run see . . . come tell the worst.”

“Oh, thanks, Mr. Wyneski, thanks!”

I ran. Dog ran. Up a street, along an alley, around back, we ducked in the ferns by my grandma’s house. “Down, boy,” I whispered. “Here the Big Event comes, whatever it is!”

And down the street and up the walk and up the steps at a brisk jaunt came this man who swung a cane and carried a carpetbag and had long brown-gray hair and silken mustaches and a goatee, politeness all about him like a flock of birds.

On the porch near the old rusty chain swing, among the potted geraniums, he surveyed Green Town.

Far away, maybe, he heard the insect hum from the barbershop, where Mr. Wyneski, who would soon be his enemy, told fortunes by the lumpy heads under his hands as he buzzed the electric clippers. Far away, maybe, he could hear the empty library where the golden dust

slid down the raw sunlight and way in back someone scratched and tapped and scratched forever with pen and ink, a quiet woman like a great lonely mouse burrowed away. And she was to be part of this new man's life, too, but right now . . .

The stranger removed his tall moss-green hat, mopped his brow, and not looking at anything but the hot blind sky said:

"Hello, boy. Hello, Dog."

Dog and I rose up among the ferns.

"Heck. How'd you know where we were hiding?"

The stranger peered into his hat for the answer. "In another incarnation, I was a boy. Time before that, if memory serves, I was a more than usually happy dog. But . . .!" His cane rapped the cardboard sign BOARD AND ROOM thumbtacked on the porch rail. "Does the sign say true, boy?"

"Best rooms on the block."

"Beds?"

"Mattresses so deep you sink down and drown the third time, happy."

"Boarders at table?"

"Talk just enough, not too much."

"Food?"

"Hot biscuits every morning, peach pie noon, shortcake every supper!"

The stranger inhaled, exhaled those savors.

"I'll sign my soul away!"

"I beg your pardon?!" Grandma was suddenly at the screen door, scowling out.

"A manner of speaking, ma'am." The stranger turned. "Not meant to sound un-Christian."

And he was inside, him talking, Grandma talking, him writing and flourishing the pen on the registry book, and me and Dog inside, breathless, watching, spelling:

"C.H."

"Read upside down, do you, boy?" said the stranger, merrily, giving pause with the inky pen.

“Yes, sir!”

On he wrote. On I spelled:

“A.R.L.E.S. Charles!”

“Right.”

Grandma peered at the calligraphy. “Oh, what a fine hand.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” On the pen scurried. And on I chanted.

“D.I.C.K.E.N.S.”

I faltered and stopped. The pen stopped. The stranger tilted his head and closed one eye, watchful of me.

“Yes?” He dared me, “What, what?”

“Dickens!” I cried.

“Good!”

“Charles Dickens, Grandma!”

“I can read, Ralph. A nice name . . .”

“Nice?” I said, agape. “It’s great! But . . . I thought you were—”

“Dead?” The stranger laughed. “No. Alive, in fine fettle, and glad to meet a recognizer, fan, and fellow reader here!”

And we were up the stairs, Grandma bringing fresh towels and pillowcases and me carrying the carpetbag, gasping, and us meeting Grandpa, a great ship of a man, sailing down the other way.

“Grandpa,” I said, watching his face for shock. “I want you to meet . . . Mr. Charles Dickens!”

Grandpa stopped for a long breath, looked at the new boarder from top to bottom, then reached out, took hold of the man’s hand, shook it firmly, and said:

“Any friend of Nicholas Nickleby’s is a friend of mine!”

Mr. Dickens fell back from the effusion, recovered, bowed, said, “Thank you, sir,” and went on up the stairs, while Grandpa winked, pinched my cheek, and left me standing there, stunned.

In the tower cupola room, with windows bright, open, and running with cool creeks of wind in all directions, Mr. Dickens drew off his horse-carriage coat and nodded at the carpetbag.

“Anywhere will do, Pip. Oh, you don’t mind I call you Pip, eh?”

“Pip?!” My cheeks burned, my face glowed with astonishing happiness.

“Oh, boy. Oh, no, sir. Pip’s fine!”

Grandma cut between us. “Here are your clean linens, Mr. . . .?”

“Dickens, ma’am.” Our boarder patted his pockets, each in turn. “Dear me, Pip, I seem to be fresh out of pads and pencils. Might it be possible—”

He saw one of my hands steal up to find something behind my ear. “I’ll be darned,” I said, “a yellow Ticonderoga Number 2!” My other hand slipped to my back pants pocket. “And hey, an Iron-Face Indian Ring-Back Notepad Number 12!”

“Extraordinary!”

“Extraordinary!”

Mr. Dickens wheeled about, surveying the world from each and every window, speaking now north, now north by east, now east, now south: “I’ve traveled two long weeks with an idea. Bastille Day. Do you know it?”

“The French Fourth of July?”

“Remarkable boy! By Bastille Day this book must be in full flood. Will you help me breach the tide gates of the Revolution, Pip?”

“With these?” I looked at the pad and pencil in my hands.

“Lick the pencil tip, boy!”

I licked.

“Top of the page: the title. Title.” Mr. Dickens mused, head down, rubbing his chin whiskers. “Pip, what’s a rare fine title for a novel that happens half in London, half in Paris?”

“A—” I ventured.

“Yes?”

“A Tale,” I went on.

“Yes?!”

“A Tale of . . . Two Cities?!”

“Madame!” Grandma looked up as he spoke. “This boy is a genius!”

“I read about this day in the Bible,” said Grandma. “Everything Ends by noon.”

“Put it down, Pip.” Mr. Dickens tapped my pad. “Quick. A Tale of Two Cities. Then, mid-page. Book the First. ‘Recalled to Life.’ Chapter 1. ‘The Period.’”

I scribbled. Grandma worked. Mr. Dickens squinted at the sky and at last intoned:

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter—”

“My,” said Grandma, “you speak fine.”

“Madame.” The author nodded, then, eyes shut, snapped his fingers to remember, on the air. “Where was I, Pip?”

“It was the winter,” I said, “of despair.”

Very late in the afternoon I heard Grandma calling someone named Ralph, Ralph, down below. I didn’t know who that was. I was writing hard.

A minute later, Grandpa called, “Pip!”

I jumped. “Yes, sir!”

“Dinnertime, Pip,” said Grandpa, up the stairwell.

I sat down at the table, hair wet, hands damp. I looked over at Grandpa.

“How did you know . . . Pip?”

“Heard the name fall out the window an hour ago.”

“Pip?” said Mr. Wyneski, just come in, sitting down.

“Boy,” I said. “I been everywhere this afternoon. The Dover Coach on the Dover Road. Paris! Traveled so much I got writer’s cramp! I—”

“Pip?” said Mr. Wyneski, again.

Grandpa came warm and easy to my rescue.

“When I was twelve, changed my name—on several occasions.” He counted the tines on his fork. “Dick. That was Dead-Eye Dick. And . . .

John. That was for Long John Silver. Then: Hyde. That was for the other half of Jekyll—”

“I never had any other name except Bernard Samuel Wyneski,” said Mr. Wyneski, his eyes still fixed to me.

“None?” cried Grandpa, startled.

“None.”

“Have you proof of childhood, then, sir?” asked Grandpa. “Or are you a natural phenomenon, like a ship becalmed at sea?”

“Eh?” said Mr. Wyneski.

Grandpa gave up and handed him his full plate.

“Fall to, Bernard Samuel, fall to.”

Mr. Wyneski let his plate lie. “Dover Coach . . .?”

“With Mr. Dickens, of course,” supplied Grandpa. “Bernard Samuel, we have a new boarder, a novelist, who is starting a new book and has chosen Pip there, Ralph, to work as his secretary—”

“Worked all afternoon,” I said. “Made a quarter!”

I slapped my hand to my mouth. A swift dark cloud had come over Mr. Wyneski’s face.

“A novelist? Named Dickens? Surely you don’t believe—”

“I believe what a man tells me until he tells me otherwise, then I believe that. Pass the butter,” said Grandpa.

The butter was passed in silence.

“. . . hell’s fires . . .” Mr. Wyneski muttered.

I slunk low in my chair.

Grandpa, slicing the chicken, heaping the plates, said, “A man with a good demeanor has entered our house. He says his name is Dickens. For all I know that is his name. He implies he is writing a book. I pass his door, look in, and, yes, he is indeed writing. Should I run tell him not to? It is obvious he needs to set the book down—”

“A Tale of Two Cities!” I said.

“A Tale!” cried Mr. Wyneski, outraged, “of Two—”

“Hush,” said Grandma.

For down the stairs and now at the door of the dining room there was the man with the long hair and the fine goatee and mustaches, nodding, smiling, peering in at us doubtful and saying, "Friends . . .?" "Mr. Dickens," I said, trying to save the day. "I want you to meet Mr. Wyneski, the greatest barber in the world—" The two men looked at each other for a long moment.

"Mr. Dickens," said Grandpa. "Will you lend us your talent, sir, for grace?"

"An honor, sir."

We bowed our heads. Mr. Wyneski did not.

Mr. Dickens looked at him gently.

Muttering, the barber glanced at the floor.

Mr. Dickens prayed:

"O Lord of the bounteous table, O Lord who furnishes forth an infinite harvest for your most respectful servants gathered here in loving humiliation, O Lord who garnishes our feast with the bright radish and the resplendent chicken, who sets before us the wine of the summer season, lemonade, and maketh us humble before simple potato pleasures, the lowborn onion and, in the finale, so my nostrils tell me, the bread of vast experiments and fine success, the highborn strawberry shortcake, most beautifully smothered and amiably drowned in fruit from your own warm garden patch, for these, and this good company, much thanks. Amen."

"Amen," said everyone but Mr. Wyneski.

We waited.

"Amen, I guess," he said.

O what a summer that was!

None like it before in Green Town history.

I never got up so early so happy ever in my life! Out of bed at five minutes to, in Paris by one minute after . . . six in the morning the English Channel boat from Calais, the White Cliffs, sky a blizzard of seagulls, Dover, then the London Coach and London Bridge by noon!

Lunch and lemonade out under the trees with Mr. Dickens, Dog licking our cheeks to cool us, then back to Paris and tea at four and . . .

“Bring up the cannon, Pip!”

“Yes, sir!”

“Mob the Bastille!”

“Yes, sir!”

And the guns were fired and the mobs ran and there I was, Mr. C. Dickens A-1 First Class Green Town, Illinois, secretary, my eyes bugging, my ears popping, my chest busting with joy, for I dreamed of being a writer some day, too, and here I was unraveling a tale with the very finest best.

“Madame Defarge, oh how she sat and knitted, knitted, sat—”

I looked up to find Grandma knitting in the window.

“Sidney Carton, what and who was he? A man of sensibility, a reading man of gentle thought and capable action . . .”

Grandpa strolled by mowing the grass.

Drums sounded beyond the hills with guns; a summer storm cracked and dropped unseen walls . . .

Mr. Wyneski?

Somehow I neglected his shop, somehow I forgot the mysterious barber pole that came up from nothing and spiraled away to nothing, and the fabulous hair that grew on his white tile floor . . .

So Mr. Wyneski then had to come home every night to find that writer with all the long hair in need of cutting, standing there at the same table thanking the Lord for this, that, and t’other, and Mr. Wyneski not thankful. For there I sat staring at Mr. Dickens like he was God until one night:

“Shall we say grace?” said Grandma.

“Mr. Wyneski is out brooding in the yard,” said Grandpa.

“Brooding?” I glanced guiltily from the window.

Grandpa tilted his chair back so he could see.

“Brooding’s the word. Saw him kick the rose bush, kick the green ferns by the porch, decide against kicking the apple tree. God made it too firm. There, he just jumped on a dandelion. Oh, oh. Here he comes, Moses crossing a Black Sea of bile.”

The door slammed. Mr. Wyneski stood at the head of the table.

“I’ll say grace tonight!”

He glared at Mr. Dickens.

“Why, I mean,” said Grandma. “Yes. Please.”

Mr. Wyneski shut his eyes tight and began his prayer of destruction:

“O Lord, who delivered me a fine June and a less fine July, help me to get through August somehow.

“O Lord, deliver me from mobs and riots in the streets of London and Paris which drum through my room night and morn, chief members of said riot being one boy who walks in his sleep, a man with a strange name and a Dog who barks after the ragtag and bobtail.

“Give me strength to resist the cries of Fraud, Thief, Fool, and Bunk Artists which rise in my mouth.

“Help me not to run shouting all the way to the Police Chief to yell that in all probability the man who shares our simple bread has a true name of Red Joe Pyke from Wilkesboro, wanted for counterfeiting life, or Bull Hammer from Hornbill, Arkansas, much desired for mean spitefulness and penny-pilfering in Oskaloosa.

“Lord, deliver the innocent boys of this world from the fell clutch of those who would tomfool their credibility.

“And Lord, help me to say, quietly, and with all deference to the lady present, that if one Charles Dickens is not on the noon train tomorrow bound for Potters Grave, Lands End, or Kankakee, I shall like Delilah, with malice, shear the black lamb and fry his mutton-chop whiskers for twilight dinners and late midnight snacks.

“I ask, Lord, not mercy for the mean, but simple justice for the malignant.

“All those agreed, say ‘Amen.’”

He sat down and stabbed a potato.
There was a long moment with everyone frozen.
And then Mr. Dickens, eyes shut said, moaning:
“Ohhhhhhhhhh . . .!”

It was a moan, a cry, a despair so long and deep it sounded like the
train way off in the country the day this man had arrived.
“Mr. Dickens,” I said.
But I was too late.
He was on his feet, blind, wheeling, touching the furniture, holding to
the wall, clutching at the doorframe, blundering into the hall, groping
up the stairs.
“Ohhhhh . . .”

It was the long cry of a man gone over a cliff into Eternity.
It seemed we sat waiting to hear him hit bottom.
Far off in the hills in the upper part of the house, his door banged shut.
My soul turned over and died.
“Charlie,” I said. “Oh, Charlie.”
Late that night, Dog howled.

And the reason he howled was that sound, that similar, muffled cry
from up in the tower cupola room.
“Holy Cow,” I said. “Call the plumber. Everything’s down the drain.”
Mr. Wyneski strode by on the sidewalk, walking nowhere, off and gone.
“That’s his fourth time around the block.” Grandpa struck a match and
lit his pipe.
“Mr. Wyneski!” I called.

No answer. The footsteps went away.
“Boy oh boy, I feel like I lost a war,” I said.
“No, Ralph, beg pardon, Pip,” said Grandpa, sitting down on the step
with me. “You just changed generals in midstream is all. And now one
of the generals is so unhappy he’s turned mean.”
“Mr. Wyneski? I—I almost hate him!”

Grandpa puffed gently on his pipe. "I don't think he even knows why he is so unhappy and mean. He has had a tooth pulled during the night by a mysterious dentist and now his tongue is aching around the empty place where the tooth was."

"We're not in church, Grandpa."

"Cut the Parables, huh? In simple words, Ralph, you used to sweep the hair off that man's shop floor. And he's a man with no wife, no family, just a job. A man with no family needs someone somewhere in the world, whether he knows it or not."

"I," I said. "I'll wash the barbershop windows tomorrow. I'll oil the red-and-white striped pole so it spins like crazy."

"I know you will, son."

A train went by in the night.

Dog howled.

Mr. Dickens answered in a strange cry from his room.

I went to bed and heard the town clock strike one and then two and at last three.

Then it was I heard the soft crying. I went out in the hall to listen by our boarder's door.

"Mr. Dickens?"

The soft sound stopped.

The door was unlocked. I dared open it.

"Mr. Dickens?"

And there he lay in the moonlight, tears streaming from his eyes, eyes wide open staring at the ceiling, motionless.

"Mr. Dickens?"

"Nobody by that name here," said he. His head moved side to side.

"Nobody by that name in this room in this bed in this world."

"You," I said. "You're Charlie Dickens."

"You ought to know better," was the mourned reply. "Long after midnight, moving on toward morning."

"All I know is," I said, "I seen you writing every day. I heard you talking every night."

“Right, right.”

“And you finish one book and start another, and write a fine calligraphy sort of hand.”

“I do that.” A nod. “Oh yes, by the demon possessions, I do.”

“So!” I circled the bed. “What call you got to feel sorry for yourself, a world-famous author?”

“You know and I know, I’m Mr. Nobody from Nowhere, on my way to Eternity with a dead flashlight and no candles.”

“Hells bells,” I said. I started for the door. I was mad because he wasn’t holding up his end. He was ruining a grand summer. “Good night!” I rattled the doorknob.

“Wait!”

It was such a terrible soft cry of need and almost pain, I dropped my hand, but I didn’t turn.

“Pip,” said the old man in the bed.

“Yeah?” I said, grouching.

“Let’s both be quiet. Sit down.”

I slowly sat on the spindly wooden chair by the night table.

“Talk to me, Pip.”

“Holy Cow, at three—”

“—in the morning, yes. Oh, it’s a fierce awful time of night. A long way back to sunset, and ten thousand miles on to dawn. We have need of friends then. Friend, Pip? Ask me things.”

“Like what?”

“I think you know.”

I brooded a moment and sighed. “Okay, okay. Who are you?”

He was very quiet for a moment lying there in his bed and then traced the words on the ceiling with a long invisible tip of his nose and said,

“I’m a man who could never fit his dream.”

“What?”

“I mean, Pip, I never became what I wanted to be.”

I was quiet now, too, “What’d you want to be?”

“A writer.”

“Did you try?”

“Try!” he cried, and almost gagged on a strange wild laugh. “Try,” he said, controlling himself. “Why Lord of Mercy, son, you never saw so much spit, ink, and sweat fly. I wrote my way through an ink factory, broke and busted a paper company, ruined and dilapidated six dozen typewriters, devoured and scribbled to the bone ten thousand Ticonderoga Soft Lead pencils.”

“Wow!”

“You may well say Wow.”

“What did you write?”

“What didn’t I write. The poem. The essay. The play tragique. The farce. The short story. The novel. A thousand words a day, boy, every day for thirty years, no day passed I did not scavenge and assault the page. Millions of words passed from my fingers onto paper and it was all bad.”

“It couldn’t have been!”

“It was. Not mediocre, not passing fair. Just plain outright mudbath bad. Friends knew it, editors knew it, teachers knew it, publishers knew it, and one strange fine day about four in the afternoon, when I was fifty, I knew it.”

“But you can’t write thirty years without—”

“Stumbling upon excellence? Striking a chord? Gaze long, gaze hard, Pip, look upon a man of peculiar talent, outstanding ability, the only man in history who put down five million words without slapping to life one small base of a story that might rear up on its frail legs and cry Eureka! we’ve done it!”

“You never sold one story?!”

“Not a two-line joke. Not a throwaway newspaper sonnet. Not a want ad or obit. Not a home-bottled autumn pickle recipe. Isn’t that rare? To be so outstandingly dull, so ridiculously inept, that nothing ever brought a chuckle, caused a tear, raised a temper, or discharged a blow. And do you know what I did on the day I discovered I would never be a writer? I killed myself.”

“Killed?!”

“Did away with, destroyed. How? I packed me up and took me away on a long train ride and sat on the back smoking-car platform a long time in the night and then one by one let the confetti of my manuscripts fly like panicked birds away down the tracks. I scattered a novel across Nebraska, my Homeric legends over North, my love sonnets through South Dakota. I abandoned my familiar essays in the men’s room at the Harvey House in Clear Springs, Idaho. The late summer wheatfields knew my prose. Grand fertilizer, it probably jumped up bumper crops of corn long after I passed.

I rode two trunks of my soul on that long summer’s journey, celebrating my badly served self. And one by one, slow at first, and then faster, faster, over I chucked them, story after story, out, out of my arms out of my head, out of my life, and down they went, sunk drowning night rivers of prairie dust, in lost continents of sand and lonely rock. And the train wallowed around a curve in a great wail of darkness and release, and I opened my fingers and let the last stillborn darlings fall. . . .

“When I reached the far terminus of the line, the trunks were empty. I had drunk much, eaten little, wept on occasion in my private room, but had heaved away my anchors, dead-weights, and dreams, and came to the sliding soft-chuffing end of my journey, praise God, in a kind of noble peace and certainty. I felt reborn. I said to myself, why, what’s this, what’s this? I’m—I’m a new man.”

He saw it all on the ceiling, and I saw it, too, like a movie run up the wall in the moonlit night.

“I—I’m a new man I said, and when I got off the train at the end of that long summer of disposal and sudden rebirth, I looked in a fly-specked, rain-freckled gum-machine mirror at a lost depot in Peachgum, Missouri, and my beard grown long in two months of travel and my hair gone wild with wind that combed it this way sane, that way mad, and I peered and stood back and exclaimed softly, ‘Why, Charlie Dickens, is that you?!’”

The man in the bed laughed softly.

“Why, Charlie,” said I, “Mr. Dickens, there you are!” And the reflection in the mirror cried out, “Dammit, sir, who else would it be!? Stand back. I’m off to a great lecture!”

“Did you really say that, Mr. Dickens?”

“God’s pillars and temples of truth, Pip. And I got out of his way! And I strode through a strange town and I knew who I was at last and grew fevers thinking on what I might do in my lifetime now reborn and all that grand fine work ahead! For, Pip, this thing must have been growing. All those years of writing and snuffing up defeat, my old subconscious must have been whispering, ‘Just you wait. Things will be black midnight bad but then in the nick of time, I’ll save you!’

“And maybe the thing that saved me was the thing ruined me in the first place: respect for my elders; the grand moguls and tall muckymucks in the lush literary highlands and me in the dry river bottom with my canoe.

“For, oh God, Pip, how I devoured Tolstoy, drank Dostoevsky, feasted on De Maupassant, had wine and chicken picnics with Flaubert and Molière. I gazed at gods too high. I read too much! So, when my work vanished, theirs stayed. Suddenly I found I could not forget their books, Pip!”

“Couldn’t?”

“I mean I could not forget any letter of any word of any sentence or any paragraph of any book ever passed under these hungry omnivorous eyes!”

“Photographic memory!”

“Bull’s-eye! All of Dickens, Hardy, Austen, Poe, Hawthorne, trapped in this old box Brownie waiting to be printed off my tongue, all those years, never knew, Pip, never guessed, I had hid it all away. Ask me to speak in tongues. Kipling is one. Thackeray another. Weigh flesh, I’m Shylock. Snuff out the light, I’m Othello. All, all, Pip, all!”

“And then? And so?”

“Why then and so, Pip, I looked another time in that fly-specked mirror and said, ‘Mr. Dickens, all this being true, when do you write your first book?’

“‘Now!’ I cried. And bought fresh paper and ink and have been delirious and joyful, lunatic and happy frantic ever since, writing all the books of my own dear self, me, I, Charles Dickens, one by one.

“I have traveled the continental vastness of the United States of North America and settled me in to write and act, act and write, lecturing here, pondering there, half in and then half out of my mania, known and unknown, lingering here to finish Copperfield, loitering there for Dombey and Son, turning up for tea with Marley’s Ghost on some pale Christmas noon. Sometimes I lie whole snowbound winters in little whistle stops and no one there guessing that Charlie Dickens bides hibernation there, then pop forth like the ottermole of spring and so move on.

Sometimes I stay whole summers in one town before I’m driven off. Oh, yes, driven. For such as your Mr. Wyneski cannot forgive the fantastic, Pip, no matter how particularly practical that fantastic be.

“For he has no humor, boy.

“He does not see that we all do what we must to survive, survive.

“Some laugh, some cry, some bang the world with fists, some run, but it all sums up the same: they make do.

“The world swarms with people, each one drowning, but each swimming a different stroke to the far shore.

“And Mr. Wyneski? He makes do with scissors and understands not my inky pen and littered papers on which I would flypaper-catch my borrowed English soul.”

Mr. Dickens put his feet out of bed and reached for his carpetbag.

“So I must pick up and go.”

I grabbed the bag first.

“No! You can’t leave! You haven’t finished the book!”

“Pip, dear boy, you haven’t been listening—”

“The world’s waiting! You can’t just quit in the middle of Two Cities!”

He took the bag quietly from me.

“Pip, Pip . . .”

“You can’t, Charlie!”

He looked into my face and it must have been so white hot he flinched away.

“I’m waiting,” I cried. “They’re waiting!”

“They . . .?”

“The mob at the Bastille. Paris! London. The Dover sea. The guillotine!”

I ran to throw all the windows even wider as if the night wind and the moonlight might bring in sounds and shadows to crawl on the rug and sneak in his eyes, and the curtains blew out in phantom gestures and I swore I heard, Charlie heard, the crowds, the coach wheels, the great slicing downfall of the cutting blades and the cabbage heads falling and battle songs and all that on the wind . . .

“Oh, Pip, Pip . . .”

Tears welled from his eyes.

I had my pencil out and my pad.

“Well?” I said.

“Where were we, this afternoon, Pip?”

“Madame Defarge, knitting.”

He let the carpetbag fall. He sat on the edge of the bed and his hands began to tumble, weave, knit, motion, tie and untie, and he looked and saw his hands and spoke and I wrote and he spoke again, stronger, and stronger, all through the rest of the night . . .

“Madame Defarge . . . yes . . . well. Take this, Pip. She—”

“Morning, Mr. Dickens!”

I flung myself into the dining room chair. Mr. Dickens was already half through his stack of pancakes.

I took one bite and then saw the even greater stack of pages lying on the table between us.

“Mr. Dickens?” I said. “The Tale of Two Cities. It’s . . . finished?”

“Done.” Mr. Dickens ate, eyes down. “Got up at six. Been working steady. Done. Finished. Through.”

“Wow!” I said.

A train whistle blew. Charlie sat up, then rose suddenly, to leave the rest of his breakfast and hurry out in the hall. I heard the front door slam and tore out on the porch to see Mr. Dickens half down the walk, carrying his carpetbag.

He was walking so fast I had to run to circle round and round him as he headed for the rail depot.

“Mr. Dickens, the book’s finished, yeah, but not published yet!”

“You be my executor, Pip.”

He fled. I pursued, gasping.

“What about David Copperfield?! Little Dorrit?!”

“Friends of yours, Pip?”

“Yours, Mr. Dickens, Charlie, oh, gosh, if you don’t write them, they’ll never live.”

“They’ll get on somehow.” He vanished around a corner. I jumped after.

“Charlie, wait. I’ll give you—a new title! Pickwick Papers, sure, Pickwick Papers!”

The train was pulling into the station.

Charlie ran fast.

“And after that, Bleak House, Charlie, and Hard Times and Great—Mr. Dickens, listen—Expectations! Oh, my gosh!”

For he was far ahead now and I could only yell after him:

“Oh, blast, go on! get off! get away! You know what I’m going to do!? You don’t deserve reading! You don’t! So right now, and from here on, see if I even bother to finish reading Tale of Two Cities! Not me! Not this one! No!”

The bell was tolling in the station. The steam was rising. But, Mr. Dickens had slowed. He stood in the middle of the sidewalk. I came up to stare at his back.

“Pip,” he said softly. “You mean what you just said?”

“You!” I cried. “You’re nothing but—” I searched in my mind and seized a thought: “—a blot of mustard, some undigested bit of raw potato—!”

““Bah, Humbug, Pip?””

“Humbug! I don’t give a blast what happens to Sidney Carton!”

“Why, it’s a far, far better thing I do than I have ever done, Pip. You must read it.”

“Why!?”

He turned to look at me with great sad eyes.

“Because I wrote it for you.”

It took all my strength to half-yell back: “So—?”

“So,” said Mr. Dickens, “I have just missed my train. Forty minutes till the next one—”

“Then you got time,” I said.

“Time for what?”

“To meet someone. Meet them, Charlie, and I promise I’ll finish reading your book. In there. In there, Charlie.”

He pulled back.

“That place? The library?!”

“Ten minutes, Mr. Dickens, give me ten minutes, just ten, Charlie. Please.”

“Ten?”

And at last, like a blind man, he let me lead him up the library steps and half-fearful, sidle in.

The library was like a stone quarry where no rain had fallen in ten thousand years.

Way off in that direction: silence.

Way off in that direction: hush.

It was the time between things finished and things begun. Nobody died here. Nobody was born. The library, and all its books, just were. We waited, Mr. Dickens and I, on the edge of the silence.

Mr. Dickens trembled. And I suddenly remembered I had never seen him here all summer. He was afraid I might take him near the fiction shelves and see all his books, written, done, finished, printed, stamped, bound, borrowed, read, repaired, and shelved.

But I wouldn't be that dumb. Even so, he took my elbow and whispered:

"Pip, what are we doing here? Let's go. There's . . ."

"Listen!" I hissed.

And a long way off in the stacks somewhere, there was a sound like a moth turning over in its sleep.

"Bless me," Mr. Dickens's eyes widened. "I know that sound."

"Sure!"

"It's the sound," he said, holding his breath, then nodding, "of someone writing."

"Yes, sir."

"Writing with a pen. And . . . and writing . . ."

"What?"

"Poetry," gasped Mr. Dickens. "That's it. Someone off there in a room, how many fathoms deep, Pip, I swear, writing a poem. There! Eh? Flourish, flourish, scratch, flourish on, on, on, that's not figures, Pip, not numerals, not dusty-dry facts, you feel it sweep, feel it scurry? A poem, by God, yes, sir, no doubt, a poem!"

"Ma'am," I called.

The moth-sound ceased.

"Don't stop her!" hissed Mr. Dickens. "Middle of inspiration. Let her go!"

The moth-scratch started again.

Flourish, flourish, scratch, on, on, stop. Flourish, flourish. I bobbed my head. I moved my lips, as did Mr. Dickens, both of us suspended, held,

leaned forward on the cool marble air listening to the vaults and stacks and echoes in the subterrane.

Flourish, flourish, scratch, on, on.

Silence.

“There.” Mr. Dickens nudged me.

“Ma’am!” I called ever so urgently soft.

And something rustled in the corridors.

And there stood the librarian, a lady between years, not young, not old; between colors, not dark, not pale; between heights, not short, not tall, but rather frail, a woman you often heard talking to herself off in the dark dust-stacks with a whisper like turned pages, a woman who glided as if on hidden wheels.

She came carrying her soft lamp of face, lighting her way with her glance.

Her lips were moving, she was busy with words in the vast room behind her clouded gaze.

Charlie read her lips eagerly. He nodded. He waited for her to halt and bring us to focus, which she did, suddenly. She gasped and laughed at herself.

“Oh, Ralph, it’s you and—” A look of recognition warmed her face.

“Why, you’re Ralph’s friend. Mr. Dickens, isn’t it?”

Charlie stared at her with a quiet and almost alarming devotion.

“Mr. Dickens,” I said. “I want you to meet—”

““Because I could not stop for Death—”” Charlie, eyes shut, quoted from memory.

The librarian blinked swiftly and her brow like a lamp turned high, took white color.

“Miss Emily,” he said.

“Her name is—” I said.

“Miss Emily.” He put out his hand to touch hers.

“Pleased,” she said. “But how did you—?”

“Know your name? Why, bless me, ma’am, I heard you scratching way off in there, runalong rush, only poets do that!”

“It’s nothing.”

“Head high, chin up,” he said, gently. “It’s something. ‘Because I could not stop for death’ is a fine A-1 first-class poem.”

“My own poems are so poor,” she said, nervously. “I copy hers out to learn.”

“Copy who?” I blurted.

“Excellent way to learn.”

“Is it, really?” She looked close at Charlie. “You’re not . . .?”

“Joking? No, not with Emily Dickinson, ma’am!”

“Emily Dickinson?” I said.

“That means much coming from you, Mr. Dickens,” she flushed. “I have read all your books.”

“All?” He backed off.

“All,” she added hastily, “that you have published so far, sir.”

“Just finished a new one.” I put in, “Sockdolager! A Tale of Two Cities.”

“And you, ma’am?” he asked, kindly.

She opened her small hands as if to let a bird go.

“Me? Why, I haven’t even sent a poem to our town newspaper.”

“You must!” he cried, with true passion and meaning. “Tomorrow. No, today!”

“But,” her voice faded. “I have no one to read them to, first.”

“Why,” said Charlie quietly. “You have Pip here, and, accept my card, C. Dickens, Esquire. Who will, if allowed, stop by on occasion, to see if all’s well in this Arcadian silo of books.”

She took his card. “I couldn’t—”

“Tut! You must. For I shall offer only warm sliced white bread. Your words must be the marmalade and summer honey jam. I shall read long and plain. You: short and rapturous of life and tempted by that odd

delicious Death you often lean upon. Enough.” He pointed. “There. At the far end of the corridor, her lamp lit ready to guide your hand . . . the Muse awaits. Keep and feed her well. Good-bye.”

“Good-bye?” she asked. “Doesn’t that mean ‘God be with you’?”
“So I have heard, dear lady, so I have heard.”

And suddenly we were back out in the sunlight, Mr. Dickens almost stumbling over his carpetbag waiting there.

In the middle of the lawn, Mr. Dickens stood very still and said, “The sky is blue, boy.”

“Yes, sir.”

“The grass is green.”

“Sure.” Then I stopped and really looked around. “I mean, heck, yeah!”

“And the wind . . . smell that sweet wind?”

We both smelled it. He said:

“And in this world are remarkable boys with vast imaginations who know the secrets of salvation . . .”

He patted my shoulder. Head down, I didn’t know what to do. And then I was saved by a whistle:

“Hey, the next train! Here it comes!”

We waited.

After a long while, Mr. Dickens said:

“There it goes . . . and let’s go home, boy.”

“Home!” I cried, joyfully, and then stopped. “But what about . . . Mr. Wyneski?”

“O, after all this, I have such confidence in you, Pip. Every afternoon while I’m having tea and resting my wits, you must trot down to the barbershop and—”

“Sweep hair!”

“Brave lad. It’s little enough. A loan of friendship from the Bank of England to the First National Bank of Green Town, Illinois. And now, Pip . . . pencil!”

I tried behind one ear, found gum; tried the other ear and found:
“Pencil!”
“Paper?”
“Paper!”
We strode along under the soft green summer trees.

“Title, Pip—”
He reached up with his cane to write a mystery on the sky. I squinted at the invisible penmanship.
“The—”
He blocked out a second word on the air.

“Old,” I translated.
A third.
“C.U.” I spelled. “R.I. . . . Curiosity!”
“How’s that for a title, Pip?”
I hesitated. “It . . . doesn’t seem, well, quite finished, sir.”

“What a Christian you are. There!”
He flourished a final word on the sun.
“S.H.O. . . . Shop! The Old Curiosity Shop.”

“Take a novel, Pip!”
“Yes, sir,” I cried. “Chapter One!”
A blizzard of snow blew through the trees.

“What’s that?” I asked, and answered:
Why, summer gone. The calendar pages, all the hours and days, like in the movies, the way they just blow off over the hills. Charlie and I working together, finished, through. Many days at the library, over!

Many nights reading aloud with Miss Emily done! Trains come and gone. Moons waxed and waned. New trains arriving and new lives teetering on the brink, and Miss Emily suddenly standing right there, and Charlie here with all their suitcases and handing me a paper sack.

“What’s this?”

“Rice, Pip, plain ordinary white rice, for the fertility ritual. Throw it at us, boy. Drive us happily away. Hear those bells, Pip? Here goes Mr. and Mrs. Charlie Dickens! Throw, boy, throw! Throw!”

I threw and ran, ran and threw, and them on the back train platform waving out of sight and me yelling good-bye, Happy marriage, Charlie! Happy times! Come back! Happy . . . Happy . . .
And by then I guess I was crying, and Dog chewing my shoes, jealous, glad to have me alone again, and Mr. Wyneski waiting at the barbershop to hand me my broom and make me his son once more.

And autumn came and lingered and at last a letter arrived from the married and traveling couple.

I kept the letter sealed all day and at dusk, while Grandpa was raking leaves by the front porch I went out to sit and watch and hold the letter and wait for him to look up and at last he did and I opened the letter and read it out loud in the October twilight:
“Dear Pip,” I read, and had to stop for a moment seeing my old special name again, my eyes were so full.

“Dear Pip. We are in Aurora tonight and Felicity tomorrow and Elgin the night after that. Charlie has six months of lectures lined up and looking forward. Charlie and I are both working steadily and are most happy . . . very happy . . . need I say?”

“He calls me Emily.

“Pip, I don’t think you know who she was, but there was a lady poet once, and I hope you’ll get her books out of the library someday.

“Well, Charlie looks at me and says: ‘This is my Emily’ and I almost believe. No, I do believe.”

I stopped and swallowed hard and read on:

“We are crazy, Pip.

“People have said it. We know it. Yet we go on. But being crazy together is fine.

“It was being crazy alone I couldn’t stand any longer.

“Charlie sends his regards and wants you to know he has indeed started a fine new book, perhaps his best yet . . . one you suggested the title for, Bleak House.

“So we write and move, move and write, Pip. And some year soon we may come back on the train which stops for water at your town. And if you’re there and call our names as we know ourselves now, we shall step off the train. But perhaps meanwhile you will get too old. And if when the train stops, Pip, you’re not there, we shall understand, and let the train move us on to another and another town.

“Signed, Emily Dickinson.

“P.S. Charlie says your grandfather is a dead ringer for Plato, but not to tell him.

“P.P.S. Charlie is my darling.”

“Charlie is my darling,” repeated Grandpa, sitting down and taking the letter to read it again. “Well, well . . .” he sighed. “Well, well . . .” We sat there a long while, looking at the burning soft October sky and the new stars. A mile off, a dog barked. Miles off, on the horizon line, a train moved along, whistled, and tolled its bell, once, twice, three times, gone.

“You know,” I said. “I don’t think they’re crazy.”

“Neither do I, Pip,” said Grandpa, lighting his pipe and blowing out the match. “Neither do I.”

The End