

# Arrival and Departure, Ray Bradbury

## Arrival and Departure

No day in all of time began with nobler heart or fresher spirit. No morn had ever chanced upon its greener self as did this morn discover spring in every aspect and every breath. Birds flew about, intoxicated, and moles and all things holed up in earth and stone ventured forth, forgetting that life itself might be forfeit.

The sky was a Pacific, a Caribbean, an Indian sea, hung in a tidal outpouring over a town that now exhaled the dust of winter from a thousand windows. Doors slammed wide. Like a tide moving over a town that now exhaled the dust of winter from a thousand windows. Doors slammed wide. Like a tide moving into a shore, wave after wave of laundered curtains broke over the piano-wire lines behind the houses.

And at last the mild sweetness of this particular day summoned forth two souls, like wintry figures from a Swiss clock, hypnotized, upon their porch. Mr and Mrs Alexander, twenty-four months locked deep in their rusty house, felt long-forgotten wings stir in their shoulder blades as the sun rekindled their bones.

‘Smellthat!’

Mrs Alexander took a drink of air and spun to accuse the house. ‘Two years! One hundred sixty-five bottles of throat molasses! Ten pounds of sulfur! Twelve boxes of sleeping pills! Five yards of flannel for our chests! How much mustard grease?’

‘Get away!’ She pushed at the house. She turned to the spring day, opened her arms. The sun made teardrops jump from her eyes.

They waited, not yet ready to descend away from two years of nursing each other, falling ill time and again, accepting but never quite enjoying

the prospect of another evening together after six hundred of seeing no other human face.

‘Why, we’re strangers here.’ The husband nodded to the shady streets.

And they remembered how they had stopped answering the door and kept the shades down, afraid that some abrupt encounter, some flash of bright sun, might shatter them to dusty ghosts.

But now, on this fountain-sparkling day, their health at last miraculously returned, old Mr and Mrs Alexander edged down the steps and into the town, like tourists from a land beneath the earth.

Reaching the main street, Mr Alexander said, ‘We’re not so old; we just felt old. Why I’m seventy-two, you’re only seventy. I’m out for some special shopping, Elma. Meet you here in two hours!’

They flew apart, rid of each other at last.

Not half a block away, passing a dress shop, Mr Alexander saw a mannequin in a window, and froze. There, ah, there! The sunlight warmed her pink cheeks, her berry-stained lips, her blue-lacquer eyes, her yellow-yarn hair.

He stood at the window for an entire minute, until a live woman appeared suddenly, arranging the displays. When she glanced up, there was Mr Alexander, smiling like a youthful idiot. She smiled back.

What a day! he thought. I could punch a hole in a plank door. I could throw a cat over the courthouse! Get out of the way, old man! Wait! Was that a mirror? Never mind. Good God! I’m really alive!

Mr Alexander was inside the shop.

‘I want to buy something!’ he said.

‘What?’ asked the beautiful saleslady.

He glanced foolishly about. 'Why, let me have a scarf. That's it, a scarf.'

He blinked at the numerous scarves she brought, smiling at him so his heart roared and tilted like a gyroscope, throwing the world out of balance. 'Pick the scarf you'd wear, yourself. That's the scarf for me.'

She chose a scarf the color of her eyes.  
'Is it for your wife?'

He handed her a five-dollar bill. 'Put the scarf on.' She obeyed. He tried to imagine Elma's head sticking out above it; failed. 'Keep it,' he said. 'It's yours.' He drifted out the sunlit door, his veins singing.

'Sir,' she called, but he was gone.

What Mrs Alexander wanted most was shoes, and after leaving her husband she entered the very first shoe shop. But not, however, before she dropped a penny in a perfume machine and pumped great vaporous founts of verbena upon her sparrow chest.

Then, with the spray clinging round her like morning mist, she plunged into the shoe store, where a fine young man with doe-brown eyes and black arched brows and hair with the sheen of patent leather pinched her ankles, feathered her instep, caressed her toes, and so entertained her feet that they blushed a soft, warm pink.

'Madame has the smallest foot I've fitted this year. Extraordinarily small.'

Mrs Alexander was a great heart seated there, beating so loudly that the salesman had to shout over the sound:

'If Madame will push down!'

'Would the lady like another color?'

He shook her left hand as she departed with three pairs of shoes, giving her fingers what seemed to be a meaningful appraisal. She laughed a

strange laugh, forgetting to say she had not worn her wedding band, her fingers had puffed with illness so many years that the ring now lay in dust. On the street, she confronted the verbena-squirting machine, another copper penny in her hand.

Mr Alexander strode with great bouncing strides up and down streets, doing a little jig of delight on meeting certain people, stopping at last, faintly tired, but not admitting it to anyone, before the United Cigar store. There, as if seven-hundred-odd noons had not vanished, stood Mr Bleak, Mr Grey, Samuel Spaulding, and the Wooden Indian. They seized and punched Mr Alexander in disbelief.

'John, you're back from the dead!'

'Coming to the lodge tonight?'

'Sure!'

'Oddfellows meeting tomorrow night?'

'I'll be there!' Invitations blew about him in a warm wind. 'Old friends, I've missed you!' He wanted to grab everyone, even the Indian. They lit his free cigar and bought him foamy beers next door in the jungle color of green-felt pool tables.

'One week from tonight,' cried Mr Alexander. 'Open house. My wife and I invite you all, good friends. Barbecue! Drinks and fun!'

Spaulding crushed his hand. 'Will your wife mind about tonight?'

'Not Elma.'

'I'll come for you at eight o'clock.'

'Fine!'

And Mr Alexander was off like a ball of Spanish moss blown on the wind.

After she left the store, Mrs Alexander was discovered in the streets of the town by a sea of women. She was the center of a bargain sale,

ladies clustering in twos and threes, everyone talking, laughing, offering, accepting at once.

'Tonight, Elma. The Thimble Club.'

'Come pick me up!'

Breathless and flushed, she pushed through, made it to a far curb, looked back as one looks at the ocean for a last time before going inland, and hustled, lighting to herself, down the avenue, counting on her fingers the appointments she had in the next week at the Elm Street Society, the Women's Patriotic League, the Sewing Basket, and the Elite Theatre Club.

The hours blazed to their finish. The courthouse clock rang once.

Mr Alexander stood on the street corner, glancing at his watch doubtfully and shaking it, muttering under his breath. A woman was standing on the opposite corner, and after ten minutes of waiting, Mr Alexander crossed over. 'I beg your pardon, but I think my watch is wrong,' he called, approaching. 'Could you give me the correct time?'

'John!' she cried.

'Elma!' he cried.

'I was standing here all the time,' she said.

'And I was standing over there!'

'You've got a new suit!'

'That's a new dress!'

'New hat.'

'So is yours.'

'New shoes.'

'How do yours fit?'

'Mine hurt.'

'So do mine.'

'I bought tickets for a play Saturday night for us, Elma! And made reservations for the Green Town picnic next month! What's that perfume you're wearing?'

'What's that cologne you've got on?'

'Nowonder we didn't recognize each other!'

They looked at each other for a long time.

'Well, let's get home. Isn't it a beautiful day?'

They squeaked along in their new shoes. 'Yes, beautiful!' they both agreed, smiling. But then they glanced at each other out of the corner of their eyes and suddenly looked away, nervously.

Their house was blue dark; it was like entering a cave after the fresh green spring afternoon.

'How about a little lunch?'

'Not hungry. You?'

'Me neither.'

'I sure do like my new shoes.'

'Mine, too.'

'Well, what'll we do the rest of the day?'

'Oh, go to a show, maybe.'

'After we rest awhile.'

'You're not tired!'

'No, no, no,' she cried hastily. 'You?'

'No, no!' he said quickly.

They sat down and felt the comfortable darkness and coolness of the room after the bright, glaring warm day.

'I think I'll just loosen my shoelaces a bit,' he said. 'Just untie the knots a moment.'

'I think I'll do the same.'

They loosened the knots and the laces in their shoes.

'Might as well get our hats off!'  
Sitting there, they removed their hats.

He looked over at her and thought: Forty-five years. Married to her forty-five years. Why, I can remember...and that time in Mills Valley...and then there was that other day...forty years ago we drove to...yes...yes. His head shook. A long time.

'Why don't you take off your tie?' she suggested.  
'Think I should, if we're going right out again?' he said.  
'Just for a moment.'

She watched him take off his tie and she thought: It's been a good marriage. We've helped each other; he's spoon-fed, washed, and dressed me when I was sick, taken good care...Forty-five years now, and the honeymoon in Mills Valley—seems like only the day before the day before yesterday.

'Why don't you get rid of your earrings?' he suggested. 'New, aren't they? They look heavy.'

'They're a bit.' She laid them aside.

They sat in their comfortable soft chairs by the green baize tables where stood arnica bottles, pellet and tablet boxes, serums, cough remedies, pads, braces and foot rubs, greases, salves, lotions, inhalants, aspirin, quinine, powders, decks of worn playing cards from a million slow games of blackjack, and books they had murmured to each other across the dark small room in the single faint bulb light, their voices like the motion of dim moths through the shadows.

'Perhaps I can slip my shoes off,' he said. 'For one hundred and twenty seconds, before we run out again.'

'Isn't right to keep your feet boxed up all the time.'  
They both slipped off their shoes.

'Elma?'

'Yes?' She looked up.

'Nothing,' he said.

They heard the mantel clock ticking. They caught each other peering at the clock. Two in the afternoon. Only six hours until eight tonight.

'John?' she said.

'Yes?'

'Never mind,' she said.

They sat.

'Why don't we put on our woolly slippers?' he wondered.

'I'll get them.'

She fetched the slippers.

They put them on, exhaling at the cool feel of the material.

'Ahhhhhh!'

'Why are you still wearing your coat and vest?'

'You know, new clothes are like a suit of armor.' He worked out of the coat and, a minute later, the vest.

The chairs creaked.

'Why, it's four o'clock,' she said, later.

'Time flies. Too late to go out now, isn't it?'

'Much too late. We'll just rest awhile. We can call a taxi to take us to supper.'

'Elma.' He licked his lips.

'Yes?'

'Oh, I forgot.' He glanced away at the wall.

'Why don't I just get out of my clothes into my bathrobe?' he suggested, five minutes later. 'I can dress in a rush when we stroll off for a big filet supper on the town.'



'Now you're being sensible,' she agreed. 'John?'

'Something you want to tell me?'

She gazed at the new shoes lying on the floor. She remembered the friendly tweak on her instep, the slow caress on her toes.

'No,' she said.

They listened for each other's hearts beating in the room. Clothed in their bathrobes, they sat sighing.

'I'm just the least bit tired. Not too much, understand,' she said. 'Just a little bit.'

'Naturally. It's been quite a day, quite a day.'

'You can't just rush out, can you?'

'Got to take it easy. We're not young anymore.'

'That's right.'

'I'm slightly exhausted, too,' he admitted casually.

'Maybe.' She glanced at the clock. 'Maybe we should have a bite here tonight. We can always dine out tomorrow evening.'

'A really smart suggestion,' he said. 'I'm not ravenous, anyway.'

'Strange, neither am I.'

'But, we'll go to a picture later tonight?'

'Of course!'

They sat munching cheese and some stale crackers like mice in the dark.

Seven o'clock.

'Do you know,' he said, 'I'm beginning to feel just a trifle queasy?'

'Oh?'

'Back aches.'

'Why don't I just rub it for you?'

'Thanks. Elma, you've got fine hands. You understand how to massage; not hard, not soft—but just right.'

'My feet are burning,' she said. 'I don't think I'll be able to make that film tonight.'

'Some other night,' he said.

'I wonder if something was wrong with that cheese? Heartburn.'

'Did you notice, too?'

They looked at the bottles on the table.

Seven-thirty. Seven forty-five.

'Almost eight o'clock.'

'John!' 'Elma!'

They had both spoken at once.

They laughed, startled.

'What is it?'

'You go ahead.'

'No, you first!'

They fell silent, listening and watching the clock, their hearts beating fast and faster. Their faces were pale.

'I think I'll take a little peppermint oil for my stomach,' said Mr Alexander.

'Hand me the spoon when you're done,' she said.

They sat smacking their lips in the dark, with only the one small moth-bulb lit.

Ticky-ticky-tick-tick-tick.

They heard the footsteps on their sidewalk. Up the front-porch stairs. The bell ringing.

They both stiffened.

The bell rang again.  
They sat in the dark.

Six more times the bell rang.  
'Let's not answer,' they both said. Startled again, they looked at each other, gasping.

They stared across the room into each other's eyes.

'It can't be anyone important.'

'No one important. They'd want to talk. And we're tired, aren't we?'

'Pretty,' she said.  
The bell rang.

There was a tinkle as Mr Alexander took another spoonful of peppermint syrup. His wife drank some water and swallowed a white pill.

The bell rang a final, hard time.

'I'll just peek,' he said, 'out the front window.'

He left his wife and went to look. And there, on the front porch, his back turned, going down the steps, was Samuel Spaulding. Mr Alexander couldn't remember his face.

Mrs Alexander was in the other front room, looking out a window, secretly. She saw a Thimble Club woman walking along the street now, turning in at the sidewalk, coming up just as the man who had rung the bell was coming down. They met. Their voices murmured out there in the calm spring night.

The two strangers glanced up at the dark house together, discussing it.

Suddenly the two strangers laughed.

They gazed at the dim house once more. Then the man and the woman walked down the sidewalk and away together, along the street, under the moonlit trees, laughing and shaking their heads and talking until they were out of sight.

Back in the living room, Mr Alexander found his wife had put out a small washtub of warm water in which, mutually, they might soak their feet. She had also brought in an extra bottle of arnica. He heard her washing her hands. When she returned from the bath, her hands and face smelled of soap instead of spring verbena.

They sat soaking their feet.

'I think we better turn in those tickets we bought for that play Saturday night,' he said, 'and the tickets for that benefit next week. You never can tell.'

'All right,' she said.

The spring afternoon seemed like a million years ago.

'I wonder who that was at the door,' she said.

'I don't know,' he said, reaching for the peppermint oil. He swallowed some. 'Game of blackjack, missus?'

She settled back in her chair with the faintest wriggle of her body.

'Don't mind if I do,' she said.

The End