



Colonel Stonesteel's Genuine Home-made Truly Egyptian Mummy, Ray Bradbury

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That was the autumn they found the genuine Egyptian mummy out past Loon Lake.

How the mummy got there, and how long it had been there, no one knew. But there it was, all wrapped up in its creosote rags, looking a bit spoiled by time, and just waiting to be found.

The day before, it was just another autumn day with the trees blazing and letting down their burned-looking leaves and a sharp smell of pepper in the air when Charlie Flagstaff, aged twelve, stepped out and stood in the middle of a pretty empty street, hoping for something big and special and exciting to happen.

"Okay," said Charlie to the sky, the horizon, the whole world. "I'm waiting. Come on!"
Nothing happened.

So Charlie kicked the leaves ahead of him across town until he came to the tallest house on the greatest street, the house where everyone in Green Town came with troubles. Charlie scowled and fidgeted. He had troubles, all right, but just couldn't lay his hand on their shape or size. So he shut his eyes and just yelled at the big house windows:
"Colonel Stonesteel!"

The front door flashed open, as if the old man had been waiting there, like Charlie, for something incredible to happen.
"Charlie," called Colonel Stonesteel, "you're old enough to rap. What is there about boys makes them shout around houses? Try again."

The door shut.
Charlie sighed, walked up, knocked softly.

“Charlie Flagstaff, is that you?” The door opened again, the colonel squinted out and down. “I thought I told you to yell around the house!” “Heck,” sighed Charlie, in despair.

“Look at that weather. Hell’s bells!” The colonel strode forth to hone his fine hatchet nose on the cool wind. “Don’t you love autumn, boy? Fine, fine day! Right?” He turned to look down into the boy’s pale face.

“Why, son, you look as if your last friend left and your dog died. What’s wrong? School starts next week?”

“Yep.”

“Halloween not coming fast enough?”

“Still six weeks off. Might as well be a year. You ever notice, colonel. . . .” The boy heaved an even greater sigh, staring out at the autumn town. “Not much ever happens around here?”

“Why, it’s Labor Day tomorrow, big parade, seven cars, the mayor, maybe fireworks—er.” The colonel came to a dead stop, not impressed with his grocery list. “How old are you, Charlie?”

“Thirteen, almost.”

“Things do tend to run down, come thirteen.” The colonel rolled his eyes inward on the rickety data inside his skull. “Come to a dead halt when you’re fourteen. Might as well die, sixteen. End of the world, seventeen. Things only start up again, come twenty or beyond. Meanwhile, Charlie, what do we do to survive until noon this very morn before Labor Day?”

“If anyone knows, it’s you, colonel,” said Charlie.

“Charlie,” said the old man, flinching from the boy’s clear stare, “I can move politicians big as prize hogs, shake the Town Hall skeletons, make locomotives run backward uphill. But small boys on long autumn weekends, glue in their head, and a bad case of Desperate Empties? Well. . . .”

Colonel Stonesteel eyed the clouds, gauged the future.

“Charlie,” he said, at last. “I am moved by your condition, touched by your lying there on the railroad tracks waiting for a train that will never come. How’s this?”

I’ll bet you six Baby Ruth candy bars against your mowing my lawn, that Green Town, Upper Illinois, population five thousand sixty-two people, one thousand dogs, will be changed forever, changed for the best, by God, some time in the next miraculous twenty-four hours. That sound good? A bet?”

“Gosh!” Charlie, riven, seized the old man’s hand and pumped it. “A bet! Colonel Stonesteel, I knew you could do it!”

“It ain’t done yet, son. But look there. The town’s the Red Sea. I order it to part. Gangway!”

The colonel marched, Charlie ran, into the house.

“Here we are, Charles, the junkyard or the graveyard. Which?”

The colonel sniffed at one door leading down to raw basement earth, another leading up to dry timber attic.

“Well—”

The attic ached with a sudden flood of wind, like an old man dying in his sleep. The colonel yanked the door wide on autumn whispers, high storms trapped and shivering in the beams.

“Hear that, Charlie? What’s it say?”

“Well—”

A gust of wind blew the colonel up the dark stairs like so much flimsy chaff.

“Time, mostly, it says, and oldness and memory, lots of things. Dust, and maybe pain. Listen to those beams! Let the wind shift the timber skeleton on a fine fall day, and you truly got time-talk. Burnings and ashes, Bombay snuffs, tomb-yard flowers gone to ghost—”

“Boy, colonel,” gasped Charlie, climbing, “you oughta write for Top Notch Story Magazine!”

“Did once! Got rejected. Here we are!”

And there indeed they were, in a place with no calendar, no months, no days, no year, but only vast spider shadows and glints of light from collapsed chandeliers lying about like great tears in the dust.

“Boy!” cried Charlie, scared, and glad of it.

“Chuck!” said the colonel. “You ready for me to birth you a real, live, half-dead sockdolager, on-the-spot mystery?”

“Ready!”

The colonel swept charts, maps, agate marbles, glass eyes, cobwebs and sneezes of dust off a table, then rolled up his sleeves.

“Great thing about midwifing mysteries is, you don’t have to boil water or wash up. Hand me that papyrus scroll over there, boy, that darning needle just beyond, that old diploma on the shelf, that wad of cannonball cotton on the floor. Jump!”

“I’m jumping.” Charlie ran and fetched, fetched and ran.

Bundles of dry twigs, clutches of pussy willow and cattails flew. The colonel’s sixteen hands were wild in the air, holding sixteen bright needles, flakes of leather, rustling of meadow grass, flickers of owl feather, glares of bright yellow fox-eye.

The colonel hummed and snorted as his miraculous eight sets of arms and hands swooped and prowled, stitched and danced.

“There!” he cried, and pointed with a chop of his nose. “Half-done. Shaping up. Peel an eye, boy. What’s it commence to start to resemble?”

Charlie circled the table, eyes stretched so wide it gaped his mouth.

“Why—why—” he gasped.

“Yes?”

“It looks like—”

“Yes, yes?”

“A mummy! Can’t be!”

“Is! Bull’s-eye on, boy! Is!”

The colonel leaned down on the long-strewn object. Wrists deep in his creation, he listened to its reeds and thistles and dry flowers whisper. “Now, you may well ask, why would anyone build a mummy in the first place? You, you inspired this, Charlie. You put me up to it. Go look out the attic window there.”

Charlie spat on the dusty window, wiped a clear viewing spot, peered out.

“Well,” said the colonel. “What do you see? Anything happening out there in the town, boy? Any murders being transacted?”

“Heck, no—”

“Anyone falling off church steeples or being run down by a maniac lawnmower?”

“Nope.”

“Any Monitors or Merrimacs sailing up the lake, dirigibles falling on the Masonic Temple and squashing six thousand Masons at a time?”

“Heck, colonel, there’s only five thousand people in Green Town!”

“Spy, boy. Look. Stare. Report!”

Charlie stared out at a very flat town.

“No dirigibles. No squashed Masonic Temples.”

“Right!” The colonel ran over to join Charlie, surveying the territory. He pointed with his hand, he pointed with his nose. “In all Green Town, in all your life, not one murder, one orphanage fire, one mad fiend carving his name on librarian ladies’ wooden legs! Face it, boy, Green Town, Upper Illinois, is the most common mean ordinary plain old bore of a town in the eternal history of the Roman, German, Russian, English, American empires! If Napoleon had been born here, he would’ve committed hara-kiri by the age of nine. Boredom. If Julius Caesar had

been raised here, he'd have got himself in the Roman Forum, aged ten, and shoved in his own dagger—”

“Boredom,” said Charlie.

“Kee-rect! Keep staring out that window while I work, son.” Colonel Stonesteel went back to flailing and shoving and pushing a strange growing shape around on the creaking table. “Boredom by the pound and ton. Boredom by the doomsday yard and the funeral mile. Lawns, homes, fur on the dogs, hair on the people, suits in the dusty store windows, all cut from the same cloth. . . .”

“Boredom,” said Charlie, on cue.

“And what do you do when you're bored, son?”

“Er—break a window in a haunted house?”

“Good grief, we got no haunted houses in Green Town, boy!”

“Used to be. Old Higley place. Torn down.”

“See my point? Now what else do we do so's not to be bored?”

“Hold a massacre?”

“No massacres here in dogs' years. Lord, even our police chief's honest! Mayor—not corrupt! Madness. Whole town faced with stark staring ennui and lulls! Last chance, Charlie, what do we do!”

“Build a mummy?” Charlie smiled.

“Bulldogs in the belfry! Watch my dust!”

The old man, cackling, grabbed bits of stuffed owl and bent lizard tail and old nicotine bandages left over from a skiing fall that had busted his ankle and broken a romance in 1895, and some patches from a 1922 Kissel Kar inner tube, and some burned-out sparklers from the last peaceful summer of 1913, and all of it weaving, shuttling together under his brittle insect-jumping fingers.

“Voilà! There, Charlie! Finished!”

“Oh, colonel.” The boy stared and gasped. “Can I make him a crown?”

“Make him a crown, boy. Make him a crown.”

The sun was going down when the colonel and Charlie and their Egyptian friend came down the dusky backstairs of the old man's house, two of them walking iron-heavy, the third floating light as toasted cornflakes on the autumn air.

"Colonel," wondered Charlie. "What we going to do with this mummy, now we got him? It ain't as if he could talk much, or walk around—" "No need, boy. Let folks talk, let folks run. Look there!"

They cracked the door and peered out at a town smothered in peace and ruined with nothing-to-do.

"Ain't enough, is it, son, you've recovered from your almost fatal seizure of Desperate Empties. Whole town out there is up to their earlobes in watchsprings, no hands on the clocks, afraid to get up every morning and find it's always and forever Sunday! Who'll offer salvation, boy?"

"Amon Bubastis Rameses Ra the Third, just arrived on the four o'clock limited?"

"God love you, boy, yes. What we got here is a giant seed. Seed's no good unless you do what with it?"

"Why," said Charlie, one eye shut. "Plant it?"

"Plant! Then watch it grow! Then what? Harvest time. Harvest! Come on, boy. Er—bring your friend."

The colonel crept out into the first nightfall.

The mummy came soon after, helped by Charlie.

Labor Day at high noon, Osiris Bubastis Rameses Amon-Ra-Tut arrived from the Land of the Dead.

An autumn wind stirred the land and flapped doors wide not with the sound of the usual Labor Day Parade, seven tour cars, a fife-and-drum corps, and the mayor, but a mob that grew as it flowed the streets and fell in a tide to inundate the lawn out front of Colonel Stonesteel's house.

The colonel and Charlie were sitting on the front porch, had been sitting there for some hours waiting for the connoption fits to arrive, the storming of the Bastille to occur. Now with dogs going mad and biting boys' ankles and boys dancing around the fringes of the mob, the colonel gazed down upon the Creation (his and Charlie's) and gave his secret smile.

"Well, Charlie . . . do I win my bet?"

"You sure do, colonel!"

"Come on."

Phones rang all across town and lunches burned on stoves, as the colonel strode forth to give the parade his papal blessings.

At the center of the mob was a horse-drawn wagon. On top of the wagon, his eyes wild with discovery, was Tom Tuppen, owner of a half-dead farm just beyond town. Tom was babbling, and the crowd was babbling, because in the back of the wagon was the special harvest delivered out of four thousand lost years of time.

"Well, flood the Nile and plant the Delta," gasped the colonel, eyes wide, staring. "Is or is not that a genuine old Egyptian mummy lying there in its original papyrus and coal-tar wrappings?"

"Sure is!" cried Charlie.

"Sure is!" yelled everyone.

"I was plowing the field this morning," said Tom Tuppen. "Plowing, just plowing! and—bang! Plow turned this right up, right before me! Like to had a stroke! Think! The Egyptians must've marched through Illinois three thousand years ago and no one knew! Revelations, I call it! Outa the way, kids! I'm taking this find to the post office lobby. Set it up on display! Giddap, now, git!"

The horse, the wagon, the mummy, the crowd, moved away, leaving the colonel behind, his eyes still pretend-wide, his mouth open.

“Hot dog,” whispered the colonel, “we did it, Charles. This uproar, babble, talk and hysterical gossip will last for a thousand days or till Armageddon, whichever comes first!”

“Yes sir, colonel!”

“Michelangelo couldn’t’ve done better. Boy David’s a castaway-lost-and-forgotten wonder compared to our Egyptian surprise and—”
The colonel stopped as the mayor rushed by.

“Colonel, Charlie, howdy! Just phoned Chicago. News folks here tomorrow breakfast! Museum folks by lunch! Glory Hallelujah for the Green Town Chamber of Commerce!”

The mayor ran off after the mob.

An autumn cloud crossed the colonel’s face and settled around his mouth.

“End of Act One, Charlie. Start thinking fast. Act Two coming up. We do want this commotion to last forever, don’t we?”

“Yes, sir—”

“Crack your brain, boy. What does Uncle Wiggily say?”

“Uncle Wiggily says—ah—go back two hops?”

“Give the boy an A-plus, a gold star, and a brownie! The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away, eh?”

Charlie looked into the old man’s face and saw visitations of plagues there. “Yes, sir.”

The colonel watched the mob milling around the post office two blocks away. The fife-and-drum corps arrived and played some tune vaguely inclined toward the Egyptian.

“Sundown, Charlie,” whispered the colonel, eyes shut. “We make our final move.”

What a day it was! Years later people said: That was a day! The mayor went home and got dressed up and came back and made three speeches and held two parades, one going up Main Street toward the

end of the trolley line, the other coming back, and Osiris Bubastis Rameses Amon-Ra-Tut at the center of both, smiling now to the right as gravity shifted his flimsy weight, and now to the left as they rounded a corner.

The fife-and-drum corps, now heavily implemented by accumulated brass, had spent an hour drinking beer and learning the triumphal march from Aïda and this they played so many times that mothers took their screaming babies into the house, and men retired to bars to soothe their nerves. There was talk of a third parade and a fourth speech, but sunset took the town unawares, and everyone, including Charlie, went home to a dinner mostly talk and short on eats.

By eight o'clock, Charlie and the colonel were driving along the leafy streets in the fine darkness, taking the air in the old man's 1924 Moon, a car that took up trembling where the colonel left off.

"Where we going, colonel?"

"Well," mused the colonel, steering at ten philosophical miles per hour, nice and easy, "everyone, including your folks, is out at Grossett's Meadow right now, right? Final Labor Day speeches.

Someone'll light the gasbag mayor and he'll go up about forty feet, kee-rect? Fire department'll be setting off the big skyrockets. Which means the post office, plus the mummy, plus the police chief sitting there with him, will be empty and vulnerable. Then, the miracle will happen, Charlie. It has to. Ask me why."

"Why?"

"Glad you asked. Well, boy, folks from Chicago'll be jumping off the train steps tomorrow hot and fresh as pancakes, with their pointy noses and glass eyes and microscopes. Those museum snoopers, plus the Associated Press, will rummage our Egyptian Pharaoh seven ways from Christmas and blow their fuse boxes. That being so, Charles—"

"We're on our way to mess around."

“You put it indelicately, boy, but truth is at the core. Look at it this way, child, life is a magic show, or should be if people didn’t go to sleep on each other. Always leave folks with a bit of mystery, son. Now, before people get used to our ancient friend, before he wears out the wrong bath towel, like any smart weekend guest he should grab the next scheduled camel west. There!”

The post office stood silent, with one light shining in the foyer. Through the great window, they could see the sheriff seated alongside the mummy-on-display, neither of them talking, abandoned by the mobs that had gone for suppers and fireworks.

“Charlie.” The colonel brought forth a brown bag in which a mysterious liquid gurgled. “Give me thirty-five minutes to mellow the sheriff down. Then you creep in, listen, follow my cues, and work the miracle. Here goes nothing!”

And the colonel stole away.

Beyond town, the mayor sat down and the fireworks went up. Charlie stood on top of the Moon and watched them for half an hour. Then, figuring the mellowing time was over, dogtrotted across the street and moused himself into the post office to stand in the shadows.

“Well, now,” the colonel was saying, seated between the Egyptian Pharaoh and the sheriff, “why don’t you just finish that bottle, sir?”
“It’s finished,” said the sheriff, and obeyed.

The colonel leaned forward in the half-light and peered at the gold amulet on the mummy’s breast.

“You believe them old sayings?”

“What old sayings?” asked the sheriff.

“If you read them hieroglyphics out loud, the mummy comes alive and walks.”

“Horse radish,” said the sheriff.

“Just look at all those fancy Egyptian symbols!” the colonel pursued.

“Someone stole my glasses. You read that stuff to me,” said the sheriff.
“Make the fool mummy walk.”

Charlie took this as a signal to move, himself, and sidled around through the shadows, closer to the Egyptian king.

“Here goes.” The colonel bent even closer to the Pharaoh’s amulet, meanwhile slipping the sheriff’s glasses out of his cupped hand into his side pocket. “First symbol on here is a hawk. Second one’s a jackal. That third’s an owl. Fourth’s a yellow fox-eye—”

“Continue,” said the sheriff.

The colonel did so, and his voice rose and fell, and the sheriff’s head nodded, and all the Egyptian pictures and words flowed and touched around the mummy until at last the colonel gave a great gasp.

“Good grief, sheriff, look!”

The sheriff blinked both eyes wide.

“The mummy,” said the colonel. “It’s going for a walk!”

“Can’t be!” cried the sheriff. “Can’t be!”

“Is,” said a voice, somewhere, maybe the Pharaoh under his breath. And the mummy lifted up, suspended, and drifted toward the door.

“Why,” cried the sheriff, tears in his eyes.

“I think he might just—fly!”

“I’d better follow and bring him back,” said the colonel.

“Do that!” said the sheriff.

The mummy was gone. The colonel ran. The door slammed.

“Oh, dear.” The sheriff lifted and shook the bottle. “Empty.”

They steamed to a halt out front of Charlie’s house.

“Your folks ever go up in your attic, boy?”

“Too small. They poke me up to rummage.”

“Good. Hoist our ancient Egyptian friend out of the back seat there, don’t weigh much, twenty pounds at the most, you carried him fine,

Charlie. Oh, that was a sight. You running out of the post office, making the mummy walk. You shoulda seen the sheriff's face!"

"I hope he don't get in trouble because of this."

"Oh, he'll bump his head and make up a fine story. Can't very well admit he saw the mummy go for a walk, can he? He'll think of something, organize a posse, you'll see. But right now, son, get our ancient friend here up, hide him good, visit him weekly. Feed him night talk. Then, thirty, forty years from now—"

"What?" asked Charlie.

"In a bad year so brimmed up with boredom it drips out your ears, when the town's long forgotten this first arrival and departure, on a morning, I say, when you lie in bed and don't want to get up, don't even want to twitch your ears or blink, you're so damned bored. . . .

Well, on that morning, Charlie, you just climb up in your rummage-sale attic and shake this mummy out of bed, toss him in a cornfield and watch new hellfire mobs break loose. Life starts over that hour, that day, for you, the town, everyone. Now grab, git, and hide, boy!"

"I hate for the night to be over," said Charlie, very quietly. "Can't we go around a few blocks and finish off some lemonade on your porch? And have him come, too."

"Lemonade it is." Colonel Stonesteel banged his heel on the car-floor. The car exploded into life. "For the lost king and the Pharaoh's son!"

It was late on Labor Day evening, and the two of them sat on the colonel's front porch again, rocking up a fair breeze, lemonades in hand, ice in mouth, sucking the sweet savor of the night's incredible adventures.

"Boy," said Charlie. "I can just see tomorrow's Clarion headlines: PRICELESS MUMMY KIDNAPPED. RAMESES-TUT VANISHES. GREAT FIND GONE. REWARD OFFERED. SHERIFF NONPLUSSED. BLACKMAIL EXPECTED."

“Talk on, boy. You do have a way with words.”

“Learned from you, colonel. Now it’s your turn.”

“What do you want me to say, boy?”

“About the mummy. What he really is. What he’s truly made of. Where he came from. What’s he mean . . .?”

“Why, boy, you were there, you helped, you saw—”

Charles looked at the old man steadily.

“No.” A long breath. “Tell me, colonel.”

The old man rose to stand in the shadows between the two rocking chairs. He reached out to touch their ancient harvest-tobacco dried-up-Nile-River-bottom old-time masterpiece, which leaned against the porch slattings.

The last Labor Day fireworks were dying in the sky. Their light died in the lapis lazuli eyes of the mummy, which watched Colonel Stonesteel, even as did the boy, waiting.

“You want to know who he truly was, once upon a time?”

The colonel gathered a handful of dust in his lungs and softly let it forth.

“He was everyone, no one, someone.” A quiet pause. “You. Me.”

“Go on,” whispered Charlie.

Continue, said the mummy’s eyes.

“He was, he is,” murmured the colonel, “a bundle of old Sunday comic pages stashed in the attic to spontaneously combust from all those forgotten notions and stuffs.

He’s a stand of papyrus left in an autumn field long before Moses, a papier-mâché tumbleweed blown out of time, this way long-gone dusk, that way at come-again dawn . . . maybe a nightmare scrap of nicotine/dogtail flag up a pole at high noon, promising something, everything . . . a chart-map of Siam, Blue River Nile source, hot desert dust-devil, all the confetti of lost trolley transfers, dried-up yellow cross-country road maps petering off in sand dunes, journey aborted,

wild jaunts yet to night-dream and commence. His body? . . . Mmmm . . . made of . . . all the crushed flowers from brand new weddings, dreadful old funerals, ticker-tapes unraveled from gone-off-forever parades to Far Rockaway, punched tickets for sleepless Egyptian Pharaoh midnight trains. Written promises, worthless stocks, crumpled deeds.

Circus posters—see there? Part of his paper-wrapped ribcage? Posters torn off seedbarns in North Storm, Ohio, shuttled south toward Fulfillment, Texas, or Promised Land, Calif-orn-I-aye! Commencement proclamations, wedding notices, birth announcements . . . all things that were once need, hope, first nickel in the pocket, framed dollar on the café wall.

Wallpaper scorched by the burning look, the blueprint etched there by the hot eyes of boys, girls, failed old men, time-orphaned women, saying: Tomorrow! Yes!

It will happen! Tomorrow! Everything that died so many nights and was born again, glory human spirit, so many rare new daybreaks! All the dumb strange shadows you ever thought, boy, or I ever inked out inside my head at three A.M. All, crushed, stashed, and now shaped into one form under our hands and here in our gaze. That, that is what old King Pharaoh Seventh Dynasty Holy Dust Himself is.”

“Wow,” whispered Charlie.

The colonel sat back down to travel again in his rocker, eyes shut, smiling.

“Colonel.” Charlie gazed off into the future. “What if, even in my old age, I don’t ever need my own particular mummy?”

“Eh?”

“What if I have a life chock-full of things, never bored, find out what I want to do, do it, make every day count, every night swell, sleep tight, wake up yelling, laugh lots, grow old still running fast, what then, colonel?”

“Why then, boy, you’ll be one of God’s luckiest people!”

“For you see, colonel,” Charlie looked at him with pure round, unblinking eyes, “I made up my mind. I’m going to be the greatest writer that ever lived.”

The colonel braked his rocker and searched the innocent fire in that small face.

“Lord, I see it. Yes. You will! Well then, Charles, when you are very old, you must find some lad, not as lucky as you, to give Osiris-Ra to. Your life may be full, but others, lost on the road, will need our Egyptian friend. Agreed? Agreed.”

The last fireworks were gone, the last fire balloons were sailing out among the gentle stars. Cars and people were driving or walking home, some fathers or mothers carrying their tired and already sleeping children.

As the quiet parade passed Colonel Stonesteel’s porch, some folks glanced in and waved at the old man and the boy and the tall dim-shadowed servant who stood between. The night was over forever. Charlie said:

“Say some more, colonel.”

“No. I’m shut. Listen to what he has to say now. Let him tell your future, Charlie. Let him start you on stories. Ready . . .?”

A wind came up and blew in the dry papyrus and sifted the ancient wrappings and trembled the curious hands and softly twitched the lips of their old/new four-thousand-year night-time visitor, whispering.

“What’s he saying, Charles?”

Charlie shut his eyes, waited, listened, nodded, let a single tear slide down his cheek, and at last said:

“Everything. Just everything. Everything I always wanted to hear.”

The End