

G.B.S.—Mark V, Ray Bradbury

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“Charlie! where you going?”

Members of the rocket crew, passing, called.

Charles Willis did not answer.

He took the vacuum tube down through the friendly humming bowels of the spaceship. He fell, thinking: This is the grand hour.

“Chuck! Where traveling?” someone called.

To meet someone dead but alive, cold but warm, forever untouchable but reaching out somehow to touch.

“Idiot! Fool!”

The voice echoed. He smiled.

Then he saw Clive, his best friend, drifting up in the opposite chute. He averted his gaze, but Clive sang out through his seashell ear-pack radio:

“I want to see you!”

“Later!” Willis said.

“I know where you’re going. Stupid!”

And Clive was gone up away while Willis fell softly down, his hands trembling.

His boots touched surface. On the instant he suffered renewed delight.

He walked down through the hidden machineries of the rocket. Lord, he thought, crazy. Here we are one hundred days gone away from the Earth in Space, and, this very hour, most of the crew, in fever, dialing their aphrodisiac animatronic devices that touched and hummed to them in their shut clamshell beds. While, what do I do? he thought. This.

He moved to peer into a small storage pit.

There, in an eternal dusk, sat the old man.

“Sir,” he said, and waited.

“Shaw,” he whispered. “Oh, Mr. George Bernard Shaw.”

The old man’s eyes sprang wide as if he had swallowed an Idea.

He seized his bony knees and gave a sharp cry of laughter.

“By God, I do accept it all!”

“Accept what, Mr. Shaw?”

Mr. Shaw flashed his bright blue gaze upon Charles Willis.

“The Universe! It thinks, therefore I am! So I had best accept, eh? Sit.”

Willis sat in the shadowed areaway, clasping his knees and his own warm delight with being here again.

“Shall I read your mind, young Willis, and tell you what you’ve been up to since last we conversed?”

“Can you read minds, Mr. Shaw?”

“No, thank God. Wouldn’t it be awful if I were not only the cuneiform-tablet robot of Geroge Bernard Shaw, but could also scan your head-bumps and spell your dreams? Unbearable.”

“You already are, Mr. Shaw.”

“Touché! Well, now.” The old man raked his reddish beard with his thin fingers, then poked Willis gently in the ribs. “How is it you are the only one aboard this starship who ever visits me?”

“Well, sir, you see—”

The young man’s cheeks burned themselves to full blossom.

“Ah, yes, I do see,” said Shaw. “Up through the honeycomb of the ship, all the happy male bees in their hives with their syrupy wind-up soft-singing nimble-nibbling toys, their bright female puppets.”

“Mostly dumb.”

“Ah, well. It was not always thus. On my last trip the Captain wished to play Scrabble using only names of characters, concepts and ideas from my plays. Now, strange boy, why do you squat here with this hideous old ego? Have you no need for that soft and gentle company abovestairs?”

“It’s a long journey, Mr. Shaw, two years out beyond Pluto and back. Plenty of time for abovestairs company. Never enough for this. I have the dreams of a goat but the genetics of a saint.”

“Well said!” The old man sprang lightly to his feet and paced about, pointing his beard now toward Alpha Centauri, now toward the nebula in Orion.

“How runs our menu today, Willis? Shall I preface Saint Joan for you? Or . . .?”

“Chuck . . .?”

Willis’s head jerked. His seashell radio whispered in his ear. “Willis! Clive calling. You’re late for dinner. I know where you are. I’m coming down. Chuck—”

Willis thumped his ear. The voice cut off.

“Quick, Mr. Shaw! Can you—well—run?”

“Can Icarus fall from the Sun? Jump! I shall pace you with these spindly cricket legs!”

They ran.

Taking the corkscrew staircase instead of the air-tube, they looked back from the top platform in time to see Clive’s shadow dart into that tomb where Shaw had died but to wake again.

“Willis!” cried his voice.

“To hell with him,” said Willis.

Shaw beamed. “Hell? I know it well. Come. I’ll show you around!” Laughing, they jumped into the feather-tube and fell up.

This was the place of stars.

Which is to say the one place in all the ship where, if one wished, one could come and truly look at the Universe and the billion billion stars which poured across it and never stopped pouring, cream from the mad dairies of the gods.

Delicious frights or outcrops, on the other hand, if you thought it so, from the sickness of Lord God Jehovah turned in his sleep, upset with Creation, and birthing dinosaur worlds spun about satanic suns.

"It's all in the thinking," observed Mr. Shaw, sidling his eyes at his young consort.

"Mr. Shaw! You can read minds?"

"Poppycock. I merely read faces. Yours is clear glass. I glanced just now and saw Job afflicted, Moses and the Burning Bush. Come. Let us look at the Deeps and see what God has been up to in the ten billion years since He collided with Himself and procreated Vastness."

They stood now, surveying the Universe, counting the stars to a billion and beyond.

"Oh," moaned the young man, suddenly, and tears fell from his eyes. "How I wish I had been alive when you were alive, sir. How I wish I had truly known you."

"This Shaw is best," retorted the old man, "all of the mincemeat and none of the tin. The coattails are better than the man. Hang to them and survive."

Space lay all about, as vast as God's first thought, as deep as His primal breathing.

They stood, one of them tall, one short, by the scanning window, with a fine view of the great Andromeda Nebula whenever they wished to focus it near with a touch of the button which made the Eye magnify and suck things close.

After a long moment of drinking stars, the young man let out his breath.

“Mr. Shaw . . .? Say it. You know what I like to hear.”

“Do I, my boy?” Mr. Shaw’s eyes twinkled.

All of Space was around them, all of the Universe, all of the night of the celestial Being, all the stars and all the places between the stars, and the ship moving on its silent course, and the crew of the ship busy at work or games or touching their amorous toys, so these two were alone with their talk, these two stood viewing the Mystery and saying what must be said.

“Say it, Mr. Shaw.”

“Well, now . . .”

Mr. Shaw fixed his eyes on a star some twenty light-years away.

“What are we?” he asked. “Why, we are the miracle of force and matter making itself over into imagination and will. Incredible. The Life Force experimenting with forms. You for one. Me for another. The Universe has shouted itself alive. We are one of the shouts.

Creation turns in its abyss. We have bothered it, dreaming ourselves to shapes. The void is filled with slumbers; ten billion on a billion on a billion bombardments of light and material that know not themselves, that sleep moving and move but finally to make an eye and waken on themselves.

Among so much that is flight and ignorance, we are the blind force that gropes like Lazarus from a billion-light-year tomb. We summon ourselves. We say, O Lazarus Life Force, truly come ye forth. So the Universe, a motion of deaths, fumbles to reach across Time to feel its own flesh and know it to be ours. We touch both ways and find each other miraculous because we are One.”

Mr. Shaw turned to glance at his young friend.

“There you have it. Satisfied?”

“Oh, yes! I—”

The young man stopped.

Behind them, in the viewing-cabin door, stood Clive. Beyond him, they could hear music pulsing from the far cubicles where crewmen and their huge toys played at amorous games.

“Well,” said Clive, “what goes on—?”

“Here?” interjected Shaw, lightly. “Why, only the confounding of two energies making do with puzzlements. This contraption—” he touched his own breast, “speaks from computerized elations. That genetic conglomeration—” he nodded at his young friend, “responds with raw, beloved, and true emotions. The sum of us? Pandemonium spread on biscuits and devoured at high tea.”

Clive swiveled his gaze to Willis.

“Damn, you’re nuts. At dinner you should have heard the laughter! You and this old man, and just talk! they said. Just talk, talk! Look, idiot, it’s your stand-watch in ten minutes. Be there! God!”

And the door was empty. Clive was gone.

Silently, Willis and Mr. Shaw floated down the drop-tube to the storage pit beneath the vast machineries.

The old man sat once again on the floor.

“Mr. Shaw.” Willis shook his head, snorting softly. “Hell. Why is it you seem more alive to me than anyone I have ever known?”

“Why, my dear young friend,” replied the old man, gently, “what you warm your hands at are Ideas, eh? I am a walking monument of concepts, scrimshaws of thought, electric deliriums of philosophy and wonder. You love concepts.

I am their receptacle. You love dreams in motion. I move. You love palaver and jabber. I am the consummate palaverer and jabberer. You

and I, together, masticate Alpha Centauri and spit forth universal myths.

We chew upon the tail of Halley's Comet and worry the Horsehead Nebula until it cries a monstrous Uncle and gives over to our creation. You love libraries. I am a library. Tickle my ribs and I vomit forth Melville's Whale, Spirit Spout and all. Tic my ear and I'll build Plato's Republic with my tongue for you to run and live in. You love Toys. I am a Toy, a fabulous plaything, a computerized—"

"—friend," said Willis, quietly.

Mr. Shaw gave him a look less of fire than of hearth.

"—friend," he said.

Willis turned to leave, then stopped to gaze back at that strange old figure propped against the dark storage wall.

"I—I'm afraid to go. I have this fear something may happen to you."

"I shall survive," replied Shaw tartly, "but only if you warn your Captain that a vast meteor shower approaches. He must shift course a few hundred thousand miles. Done?"

"Done." But still Willis did not leave.

"Mr. Shaw," he said, at last. "What . . . what do you do while the rest of us sleep?"

"Do? Why, bless you. I listen to my tuning fork. Then, I write symphonies between my ears."

Willis was gone.

In the dark, alone, the old man bent his head. A soft hive of dark bees began to hum under his honey-sweet breath.

Four hours later, Willis, off watch, crept into his sleep-cubicle.

In half-light, the mouth was waiting for him.

Clive's mouth. It licked its lips and whispered:

“Everyone’s talking. About you making an ass out of yourself visiting a two-hundred-year-old intellectual relic, you, you, you. Jesus, the psychomed’ll be out tomorrow to X-ray your stupid skull!”

“Better that than what you men do all night every night,” said Willis.

“What we do is us.”

“Then why not let me be me?”

“Because it’s unnatural.” The tongue licked and darted. “We all miss you. Tonight we piled all the grand toys in the midst of the wild room and—”

“I don’t want to hear it!”

“Well, then,” said the mouth, “I might just trot down and tell all this to your old gentleman friend—”

“Don’t go near him!”

“I might.” The lips moved in the shadows. “You can’t stand guard on him forever. Some night soon, when you’re asleep, someone might—tamper with him, eh? Scramble his electronic eggs so he’ll talk vaudeville instead of Saint Joan? Ha, yes. Think. Long journey. Crew’s bored. Practical joke like that, worth a million to see you froth. Beware, Charlie. Best come play with us.”

Willis, eyes shut, let the blaze out of him.

“Whoever dares to touch Mr. Shaw, so help me God, I’ll kill!”

He turned violently on his side, gnawing the back of his fist.

In the half-dark, he could sense Clive’s mouth still moving.

“Kill? Well, well. Pity. Sweet dreams.”

An hour later, Willis gulped two pills and fell stunned into sleep.

In the middle of the night he dreamed that they were burning good Saint Joan at the stake and, in the midst of burning, the plain-potato maiden turned to an old man stoically wrapped around with ropes and vines. The old man’s beard was fiery red even before the flames

reached it, and his bright blue eyes were fixed fiercely upon Eternity, ignoring the fire.

“Recant!” cried a voice. “Confess and recant! Recant!”

“There is nothing to confess, therefore no need for recantation,” said the old man quietly.

The flames leaped up his body like a mob of insane and burning mice.

“Mr. Shaw!” screamed Willis.

He sprang awake.

Mr. Shaw.

The cabin was silent. Clive lay asleep.

On his face was a smile.

The smile made Willis pull back, with a cry. He dressed. He ran.

Like a leaf in autumn he fell down the air-tube, growing older and heavier with each long instant.

The storage pit where the old man “slept” was much more quiet than it had a right to be.

Willis bent. His hand trembled. At last, he touched the old man.

“Sir—?”

There was no motion. The beard did not bristle. Nor the eyes fire themselves to blue flames. Nor the mouth tremble with gentle blasphemies . . .

“Oh, Mr. Shaw,” he said. “Are you dead, then, oh God, are you really dead?”

The old man was what they called dead when a machine no longer spoke or tuned an electric thought or moved. His dreams and philosophies were snow in his shut mouth.

Willis turned the body this way and that looking for some cut, wound, or bruise on the skin.

He thought of the years ahead, the long traveling years and no Mr. Shaw to walk with, gibber with, laugh with. Women in the storage

shelves, yes, women in the cots late at night, laughing their strange taped laughs and moving their strange machined motions, and saying the same dumb things that were said on a thousand worlds on a thousand nights.

“Oh, Mr. Shaw,” he murmured at last. “Who did this to you?”

Silly boy, whispered Mr. Shaw’s memory voice. You know.

I know, thought Willis.

He whispered a name and ran away.

“Damn you, you killed him!”

Willis seized Clive’s bedclothes, at which instant Clive, like a robot, popped wide his eyes. The smile remained constant.

“You can’t kill what was never alive,” he said.

“Son of a bitch!”

He struck Clive once in the mouth, after which Clive was on his feet, laughing in some strange wild way, wiping blood from his lips.

“What did you do to him?” cried Willis.

“Not much, just—”

But that was the end of their conversation.

“On posts!” a voice cried. “Collision course!”

Bells rang. Sirens shrieked.

In the midst of their shared rage, Willis and Clive turned cursing to seize emergency spacesuits and helmets off the cabin walls.

“Damn, oh, damn, oh—d—”

Half-through his last damn, Clive gasped. He vanished out a sudden hole in the side of the rocket.

The meteor had come and gone in a billionth of a second. On its way out, it had taken all the air in the ship with it through a hole the size of a small car.

My God, thought Willis, he’s gone forever.

What saved Willis was a ladder he stood near, against which the swift river of air crushed him on its way into Space. For a moment he could

not move or breathe. Then the suction was finished, all the air in the ship gone.

There was only time to adjust the pressure in his suit and helmet, and glance wildly around at the veering ship which was being bombarded now as in a space war. Men ran, or rather floated, shouting wildly, everywhere.

Shaw, thought Willis unreasonably, and had to laugh. Shaw. A final meteor in a tribe of meteors struck the motor section of the rocket and blew the entire ship apart. Shaw, Shaw, oh, Shaw, thought Willis.

He saw the rocket fly apart like a shredded balloon, all its gases only impelling it to more disintegration. With the bits and pieces went wild crowds of men, dismissed from school, from life, from all and everything, never to meet face to face again, not even to say farewell, the dismissal was so abrupt and their deaths and isolation such a swift surprise.

Good-bye, thought Willis.

But there was no true good-bye. He could hear no weeping and no laments over his radio. Of all the crew, he was the last and final and only one alive, because of his suit, his helmet, his oxygen, miraculously spared. For what? To be alone and fall?

To be alone. To fall.

Oh, Mr. Shaw, oh, sir, he thought.

“No sooner called than delivered,” whispered a voice.

It was impossible, but . . .

Drifting, spinning, the ancient doll with the wild red beard and blazing blue eyes fell across darkness as if impelled by God’s breath, on a whim.

Instinctively, Willis opened his arms.

And the old party landed there, smiling, breathing heavily, or pretending to breathe heavily, as was his bent.

“Well, well, Willis! Quite a treat, eh?”

“Mr. Shaw! You were dead!”

“Poppycock! Someone bent some wires in me. The collision knocked things back together. The disconnection is here below my chin. A villain cut me there. So if I fall dead again, jiggle under my jaw and wire me up, eh?”

“Yes, sir!”

“How much food do you carry at this moment, Willis?”

“Enough to last two hundred days in Space.”

“Dear me, that’s fine, fine! And self-recycling oxygen units, also, for two hundred days?”

“Yes, sir. Now, how long will your batteries last, Mr. Shaw?”

“Ten thousand years!” the old man sang out happily. “Yes, I vow, I swear! I am fitted with solar-cells which will collect God’s universal light until I wear out my circuits.”

“Which means you will outtalk me, Mr. Shaw, long after I have stopped eating and breathing.”

“At which point you must dine on conversation, and breathe past participles instead of air. But, we must hold the thought of rescue uppermost. Are not the chances good?”

“Rockets do come by. And I am equipped with radio signals—”

“Which even now cry out into the deep night: I’m here with ramshackle Shaw, eh?”

I’m here with ramshackle Shaw, thought Willis, and was suddenly warm in winter.

“Well, then, while we’re waiting to be rescued, Charles Willis, what next?”

“Next? Why—”

They fell away down Space alone but not alone, fearful but elated, and now grown suddenly quiet.

“Say it, Mr. Shaw.”

“Say what?”

“You know. Say it again.”

“Well, then.” They spun lazily, holding to each other. “Isn’t life miraculous? Matter and force, yes, matter and force making itself over into intelligence and will.”

“Is that what we are, sir?”

“We are, bet ten thousand bright tin-whistles on it, we are. Shall I say more, young Willis?”

“Please, sir,” laughed Willis. “I want some more!”

And the old man spoke and the young man listened and the young man spoke and the old man hooted and they fell around a corner of Universe away out of sight, eating and talking, talking and eating, the young man biting gumball foods, the old man devouring sunlight with his solar-cell eyes, and the last that was seen of them they were gesticulating and babbling and conversing and waving their hands until their voices faded into Time and the solar system turned over in its sleep and covered them with a blanket of dark and light, and whether or not a rescue ship named Rachel, seeking her lost children, ever came by and found them, who can tell, who would truly ever want to know?

The end