

# Getting Through Sunday Somehow, Ray Bradbury

## Getting Through Sunday Somehow

It was Sunday noon and the fog touching at the hotel windows when the mist did not and rain rinsing the fog and then leaving off to let the mist return and coffee after lunch was prolonging itself into tea with the promise of high tea ahead and beyond that the Buttery pub opening belowstairs, or the Second Coming and the only sound was porcelain cups against porcelain teeth and the whisper of silk or the creak of shoes until at last a swinging door leading from the small library—writing room squealed softly open and an old man, holding on to the air should he fall, shuffled out, stopped, looked around at everyone, slowly, and said in a calm drear voice:  
“Getting through Sunday somehow?”

Then he turned, shuffled back through, and let the door creak whisper shut.

Sunday in Dublin.

The words are Doom itself.

Sunday in Dublin.

Drop such words and they never strike bottom. They just fall through emptiness toward five in the gray afternoon.

Sunday in Dublin. How to get through it somehow.

Sound the funeral bells. Yank the covers up over your ears. Hear the hiss of the black-feathered wreath as it rustles, hung on your silent door. Listen to those empty streets below your hotel room waiting to gulp you if you venture forth before noon.

Feel the mist sliding its wet flannel tongue under the window ledges, licking hotel roofs, its great bulk dripping of ennui.

Sunday, I thought. Dublin. The pubs shut tight until late afternoon. The cinemas sold out two or three weeks in advance. Nothing to do but

perhaps go stare at the uriny lions at the Phoenix Park Zoo, at the vultures looking as though they'd fallen, covered with glue, into the ragpickers' bin. Wander by the River Liffey, see the fog-colored waters. Wander in the alleys, see the Liffey-colored skies.

No, I thought wildly, go back to bed, wake me at sunset, feed me high tea, tuck me in again, good night, all!

But I staggered out, a hero, and in a faint panic at noon considered the day outside from the corners of my eyes. There it lay, a deserted corridor of hours, colored like the upper side of my tongue on a dim morn.

Even God must be bored with days like this in northern lands. I could not resist thinking of Sicily, where any Sunday is a fete in regalia, a celebratory fireworks parade as springtime flocks of chickens and humans strut and pringle the warm pancake-batter alleys, waving their combs, their hands, their feet, tilting their sun-blazed eyes, while music in free gifts leaps or is thrown from each never-shut window.

But Dublin! Dublin! Ah, you great dead brute of a city! I thought, peering from the hotel lobby window at the rained-on, sooted-over corpse. Here are two coins for your eyes!

Then I opened the door and stepped out into all of that criminal Sunday which awaited only me.

I shut another door in The Four Provinces. I stood in the deep silence of this Sabbath pub. I moved noiselessly to whisper for the best drink and stood a long while nursing my soul.

Nearby, an old man was similarly engaged in finding the pattern of his life in the depths of his glass. Ten minutes must have passed when, very slowly, the old man raised his head to stare deep beyond the fly specks on the mirror, beyond me, beyond himself.

“What have I done,” he mourned, “for a single mortal soul this day? Nothing! And that’s why I feel so terrible destroyed.”  
I waited.

“The older I get,” said the man, “the less I do for people. The less I do, the more I feel a prisoner at the bar. Smash and grab, that’s me!”  
“Well—” I said.

“No!” cried the old man. “It’s an awesome responsibility when the world runs to hand you things. For an instance: sunsets. Everything pink and gold, looking like those melons they ship up from Spain. That’s a gift, ain’t it?”  
“It is.”

“Well, who do you thank for sunsets? And don’t drag the Lord in the bar, now! Any remarks to Him are too quiet. I mean someone to grab and slap their back and say thanks for the fine early light this morn, boyo, or much obliged for the look of them damn wee flowers by the road this day, and the grass laying about in the wind. Those are gifts too, who’ll deny it?”  
“Not me,” I said.

“Have you ever waked middle of the night and felt summer coming on for the first time, through the window, after the long cold? Did you shake your wife and tell her your gratitude? No, you lay there, a clod, chortling to yourself alone, you and the new weather! Do you see the pattern I’m at, now?”  
“Clearly,” I said.

“Then ain’t you horribly guilty yourself? Don’t the burden make you hunchback? All the lovely things you got from life, and no penny down? Ain’t they hid in your dark flesh somewhere, lighting up your soul, them fine summers and easy falls, or maybe just the clean taste of stout here, all gifts, and you feeling the fool to go thank any mortal man for your fortune. What befalls chaps like us, I ask, who coin up all their gratitude for a lifetime and spend none of it, misers that we be? One day, don’t we crack down the beam and show the dry rot?”

“I never thought—”

“Think, man!” he cried. “You’re American, ain’t you, and young? Got the same natural gifts as me? But for lack of humbly thanking someone somewhere somehow, you’re getting round in the shoulder and short in the breath. Act, man, before you’re the walking dead!”

With this he lapsed quietly into the final half of his reverie, with the Guinness lapping a soft lace mustache slowly along his upper lip.

I stepped from the pub into the Sunday weather.

I stood looking at the gray-stone streets and the gray-stone clouds, watching the frozen people trudge by exhaling gray funeral plumes from their wintry mouths.

Days like this, I thought, all the things you never did catch up with you, unravel your laces, itch your beard. God help any man who hasn’t paid his debts this day.

Drearily, I turned like a weathercock in a slow wind. I stood very still. I listened.

For it seemed the wind had shifted and now blew from the west country and brought with it a prickling and tingling: the strum of a harp. “Well,” I whispered.

As if a cork had been pulled, all the heavy gray sea waters vanished roaring down a hole in my shoe; I felt my sadness go. And around the corner I went.

And there sat a little woman, not half as big as her harp, her hands held out in the shivering strings like a child feeling a fine clear rain.

The harp threads flurried; the sounds dissolved like shudders of disturbed water nudging a shore. “Danny Boy” leaped out of the harp. “Wearin’ of the Green” sprang after, full-clothed.

Then “Limerick Is My Town, Sean Liam Is My Name” and “The Loudest Wake That Ever Was.” The harp sound was the kind of thing you feel when champagne, poured in a full big glass, prickles your eyelids, sprays soft on your brow.

Spanish oranges bloomed in my cheeks. My breath fided my nostrils. My feet minced, hidden, a secret dancing in my motionless shoes. The harp played “Yankee Doodle.”

And then I turned sad again.

For look, I thought, she doesn’t see her harp. She doesn’t hear her music!

True. Her hands, all alone, jumped and frolicked on the air, picked and pringled the strings, two ancient spiders busy at webs quickly built, then, torn by wind, rebuilt. She let her fingers play abandoned, to themselves, while her face turned this way and that, as if she lived in a nearby house and need only glance out on occasion to see her hands had come to no harm.

“Ah . . .” My soul sighed in me.

Here’s your chance! I almost shouted. Good God, of course!

But I held to myself and let her reap out the last full falling sheaves of “Yankee Doodle.”

Then, heartbeat in throat, I said:

“You play beautifully.”

Thirty pounds melted from my body.

The woman nodded and began “Summer on the Shore,” her fingers weaving mantillas from mere breath.

“You play very beautifully indeed,” I said.

Another twenty pounds fell from my limbs.

“When you play forty years,” she said, “you don’t notice.”

“You play well enough to be in a theater.”

“Be off with you!” Two sparrows pecked in the shuttling loom. “Why should I think of orchestras and bands?”

“It’s indoors work,” I said.

“My father,” she said, while her hands went away and returned, “made this harp, played it fine, taught me how. God’s sake, he said, keep out from under roofs!”

The old woman blinked, remembering. “Play out back, in front, around the sides of theaters, Da said, but don’t play in where the music gets snuffed. Might as well harp in a coffin!”

“Doesn’t this rain hurt your instrument?”

“It’s inside places hurt harps with heat and steam, Da said. Keep it out, let it breathe, take on fine tones and timbres from the air. Besides, Da said, when people buy tickets, each thinks it’s in him to yell if you don’t play up, down, sideways, for him alone. Shy off from that, Da said; they’ll call you handsome one year, brute the next. Get where they’ll pass on by; if they like your song—hurrah!

Those that don’t will run from your life. That way, girl, you’ll meet just those who lean from natural bent in your direction. Why closet yourself with demon fiends when you can live in the streets’ fresh wind with abiding angels? But I do go on. Ah, now, why?”

She peered at me for the first time, like someone come from a dark room, squinting.

“Who are you?” she asked. “You set my tongue loose! What’re you up to?”

“Up to no good until a minute ago when I came around this corner,” I said. “Ready to knock over Nelson’s pillar. Ready to pick a theater queue and brawl along it, half weeping and half blasphemous . . .”

“I don’t see you doing it.” Her hands wove out another yard of song.

“What changed your mind?”

“You,” I said.

I might have fired a cannon in her face.

“Me?” she said.

“You picked the day up off the stones, gave it a whack, set it running with a yell again.”

“I did that?”

For the first time, I heard a few notes missing from the tune.

“Or, if you like, those hands of yours that go about their work without your knowing.”

“The clothes must be washed, so you wash them.”

I felt the iron weights gather in my limbs.

“Don’t!” I said. “Why should we, coming by, be happy with this thing, and not you?”

She cocked her head; her hands moved slower still.

“And why should you bother with the likes of me?”

I stood before her, and could I tell what the man told me in the lulling quiet of The Four Provinces. Could I mention the hill of beauty that had risen to fill my soul through a lifetime, and myself with a toy sand-shovel doling it back to the world in dribs and drabs?

Should I list all my debts to people on stages and silver screens who made me laugh or cry or just come alive, but no one in the dark theater to turn to and dare shout, “If you ever need help, I’m your friend!”

Should I recall for her the man on a bus ten years before who chuckled so easy and light from the last seat that the sound of him melted everyone else to laughing warm and rollicking off out the doors, but with no one brave enough to pause and touch the man’s arm and say, “Oh, man, you’ve favored us this night; Lord bless you!” Could I tell how she was just one part of a great account long owed and due? No, none of this could I tell.

“Imagine something.”

“I’m ready,” she said.

“Imagine you’re an American writer, looking for material, far from home, wife, children, friends, in a cheerless hotel, on a bad gray day with naught but broken glass, chewed tobacco, and sooty snow in your soul.

Imagine you’re walking in the damned cold streets and turn a corner, and there’s this little woman with a golden harp and everything she plays is another season—autumn, spring, summer—coming, going in a free-for-all. And the ice melts, the fog lifts, the wind burns with June, and ten years shuck off your life. Imagine, if you please.”

She stopped her tune.

She was shocked at the sudden silence.

“You are daft,” she said.

“Imagine you’re me,” I said. “Going back to my hotel now. And on my way I’d like to hear anything, anything at all. Play. And when you play, walk off around the corner and listen.”

She put her hands to the strings and paused, working her mouth. I waited. At last she sighed, she moaned. Then suddenly she cried:

“Go on!”

“What . . .?”

“You’ve made me all thumbs! Look! You’ve spoilt it!”

“I just wanted to thank—”

“Me behind!” she cried. “What a clod, what a brute! Mind your business! Do your work! Let be, man! Ah, these poor fingers, ruint, ruint!”

She stared at them and at me with a terrible glaring fixity.

“Get!” she shouted.

I ran around the corner in despair.

There! I thought, you’ve done it! By thanks destroyed, that’s her story.

Fool, why didn’t you keep your mouth shut?

I sank, I leaned, against a building. A minute must have ticked by.



Please, woman, I thought, come on. Play. Not for me. Play for yourself.  
Forget what I said! Please.  
I heard a few faint, tentative harp whispers.  
Another pause.

Then, when the wind blew again, it brought the sound of her very slow  
playing.  
The song itself was an old one, and I knew the words. I said them to  
myself.

Tread lightly to the music,  
Nor bruise the tender grass,  
Life passes in the weather  
As the sand storms down the glass.

Yes, I thought, go on.  
Drift easy in the shadows,  
Bask lazy in the sun,  
Give thanks for thirsts and quenches,  
For dines and wines and wenchies.  
Give thought to life soon over,  
Tread softly on the clover,  
So bruise not any lover.

So exit from the living,  
Salute and make thanksgiving,  
Then sleep when all is done,  
That sleep so dearly won.  
Why, I thought, how wise the old woman is,  
Tread lightly to the music.  
And I'd almost squashed her with praise.

So bruise not any lover.

And she was covered with bruises from my kind thoughtlessness.

But now, with a song that taught more than I could say, she was soothing herself.

I waited until she was well into the third chorus before I walked by again, tipping my hat.

But her eyes were shut and she was listening to what her hands were up to, moving in the strings like the fresh hands of a very young girl who has first known rain and washes her palms in its clear waterfalls.

She had gone through caring not at all, and then caring too much, and was now busy caring just the right way.

The corners of her mouth were pinned up, gently.

A close call, I thought. Very close.

I left them like two friends met in the street, the harp and herself.

I ran for the hotel to thank her the only way I knew how: to do my own work and do it well.

But on the way I stopped at The Four Provinces.

The music was still being treaded lightly and the clover was still being treaded softly, and no lover at all was being bruised as I let the pub door hush and looked all around for the man whose hand I most wanted to shake.

The End