

I See You Never, Ray Bradbury

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The soft knock came at the kitchen door, and when Mrs. O'Brian opened it, there on the back porch were her best tenant, Mr. Ramirez, and two police officers, one on each side of him. Mr. Ramirez just stood there, walled in and small.

"Why, Mr. Ramirez!" said Mrs. O'Brian.

Mr. Ramirez was overcome. He did not seem to have words to explain.

He had arrived at Mrs. O'Brian's rooming house more than two years earlier and had lived there ever since. He had come by bus from Mexico City to San Diego and had then gone up to Los Angeles.

There he had found the clean little room, with glossy blue linoleum, and pictures and calendars on the flowered walls, and Mrs. O'Brian as the strict but kindly landlady. During the war he had worked at the airplane factory and made parts for the planes that flew off somewhere, and even now, after the war, he still held his job.

From the first he had made big money. He saved some of it, and he got drunk only once a week—a privilege that, to Mrs. O'Brian's way of thinking, every good workingman deserved, unquestioned and unprimanded.

Inside Mrs. O'Brian's kitchen, pies were baking in the oven. Soon the pies would come out with complexions like Mr. Ramirez'—brown and shiny and crisp, with slits in them for the air almost like the slits of Mr. Ramirez' dark eyes. The kitchen smelled good. The policemen leaned forward, lured by the odor.

Mr. Ramirez gazed at his feet as if they had carried him into all this trouble.

"What happened, Mr. Ramirez?" asked Mrs. O'Brian.

Behind Mrs. O'Brian, as he lifted his eyes, Mr. Ramirez saw the long table laid with clean white linen and set with a platter, cool, shining glasses, a water pitcher with ice cubes floating inside it, a bowl of fresh potato salad and one of bananas and oranges, cubed and sugared. At this table sat Mrs. O'Brian's children—her three grown sons, eating and conversing, and her two younger daughters, who were staring at the policemen as they ate.

"I have been here thirty months," said Mr. Ramirez quietly, looking at Mrs. O'Brian's plump hands.

"That's six months too long," said one policeman. "He only had a temporary visa. We've just got around to looking for him."

Soon after Mr. Ramirez had arrived he bought a radio for his little room; evenings, he turned it up very loud and enjoyed it. And he had bought a wristwatch and enjoyed that too. And on many nights he had walked silent streets and seen the bright clothes in the windows and bought some of them, and he had seen the jewels and bought some of them for his few lady friends. And he had gone to picture shows five nights a week for a while.

Then, also, he had ridden the streetcars—all night some nights—smelling the electricity, his dark eyes moving over the advertisements, feeling the wheels rumble under him, watching the little sleeping houses and big hotels slip by.

Besides that, he had gone to large restaurants, where he had eaten many-course dinners, and to the opera and the theater. And he had bought a car, which later, when he forgot to pay for it, the dealer had driven off angrily from in front of the rooming house.

"So here I am," said Mr. Ramirez now, "to tell you I must give up my room, Mrs. O'Brian. I come to get my baggage and clothes and go with these men."

"Back to Mexico?"

“Yes. To Lagos. That is a little town north of Mexico City.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Ramirez.”

“I’m packed,” said Mr. Ramirez hoarsely, blinking his dark eyes rapidly and moving his hands helplessly before him. The policemen did not touch him. There was no necessity for that.

“Here is the key, Mrs. O’Brian,” Mr. Ramirez said. “I have my bag already.”

Mrs. O’Brian, for the first time, noticed a suitcase standing behind him on the porch.

Mr. Ramirez looked in again at the huge kitchen, at the bright silver cutlery and the young people eating and the shining waxed floor. He turned and looked for a long moment at the apartment house next door, rising up three stories, high and beautiful. He looked at the balconies and fire escapes and backporch stairs, at the lines of laundry snapping in the wind.

“You’ve been a good tenant,” said Mrs. O’Brian.

“Thank you, thank you, Mrs. O’Brian,” he said softly. He closed his eyes.

Mrs. O’Brian stood holding the door half open. One of her sons, behind her, said that her dinner was getting cold, but she shook her head at him and turned back to Mr. Ramirez.

She remembered a visit she had once made to some Mexican border towns—the hot days, the endless crickets leaping and falling or lying dead and brittle like the small cigars in the shop windows, and the canals taking river water out to the farms, the dirt roads, the scorched scape.

She remembered the silent towns, the warm beer, the hot, thick foods each day.

She remembered the slow, dragging horses and the parched jack rabbits on the road. She remembered the iron mountains and the dusty

valleys and the ocean beaches that spread hundreds of miles with no sound but the waves—no cars, no buildings, nothing.

“I’m sure sorry, Mr. Ramirez,” she said.

“I don’t want to go back, Mrs. O’Brian,” he said weakly. “I like it here, I want to stay here. I’ve worked, I’ve got money. I look all right, don’t I? And I don’t want to go back!”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Ramirez,” she said. “I wish there was something I could do.”

“Mrs. O’Brian!” he cried suddenly, tears rolling out from under his eyelids. He reached out his hand and took her hand fervently, shaking it, wringing it, holding to it. “Mrs. O’Brian, I see you never, I see you never!”

The policemen smiled at this, but Mr. Ramirez did not notice it, and they stopped smiling very soon.

“Good-bye, Mrs. O’Brian. You have been good to me. Oh, good-bye, Mrs. O’Brian. I see you never!”

The policemen waited for Mr. Ramirez to turn, pick up his suitcase, and walk away. Then they followed him, tipping their caps to Mrs. O’Brian. She watched them go down the porch steps. Then she shut the door quietly and went slowly back to her chair at the table. She pulled the chair out and sat down. She picked up the shining knife and fork and started once more upon her steak.

“Hurry up, Mom,” said one of the sons. “It’ll be cold.”

Mrs. O’Brian took one bite and chewed on it for a long, slow time; then she stared at the closed door. She laid down her knife and fork.

“What’s wrong, Ma?” asked her son.

“I just realized,” said Mrs. O’Brian—she put her hand to her face—“I’ll never see Mr. Ramirez again.”

The End