

Last Rites, Ray Bradbury

Last Rites

Harrison Cooper was not that old, only thirty-nine, touching at the warm rim of forty rather than the cold rim of thirty, which makes a great difference in temperature and attitude. He was a genius verging on the brilliant, unmarried, unengaged, with no children that he could honestly claim, so having nothing much else to do, woke one morning in the summer of 1999, weeping.

“Why!?”

Out of bed, he faced his mirror to watch the tears, examine his sadness, trace the woe. Like a child, curious after emotion, he charted his own map, found no capital city of despair, but only a vast and empty expanse of sorrow, and went to shave.

Which didn't help, for Harrison Cooper had stumbled on some secret supply of melancholy that, even as he shaved, spilled in rivulets down his soaped cheeks.

“Great God,” he cried. “I'm at a funeral, but who's dead?!”

He ate his breakfast toast somewhat soggy than usual and plunged off to his laboratory to see if gazing at his Time Traveler would solve the mystery of eyes that shed rain while the rest of him stood fair.

Time Traveler? Ah, yes.

For Harrison Cooper had spent the better part of his third decade wiring circuitries of impossible pasts and as yet untouchable futures. Most men philosophize in their as-beautiful-as-women cars. Harrison Cooper chose to dream and knock together from pure air and electric thunderclaps what he called his Möbius Machine.

He had told his friends, with wine-colored nonchalance, that he was taking a future strip and a past strip, giving them a now half twist, so they looped on a single plane. Like those figure-eight ribbons, cut and pasted by that dear mathematician A. F. Möbius in the nineteenth century.

“Ah, yes, Möbius,” friends murmured.

What they really meant was, “Ah, no. Good night.”

Harrison Cooper was not a mad scientist, but he was irretrievably boring. Knowing this, he had retreated to finish the Möbius Machine. Now, this strange morning, with cold rain streaming from his eyes, he stood staring at the damned contraption, bewildered that he was not dancing about with Creation’s joy.

He was interrupted by the ringing of the laboratory doorbell and opened the door to find one of those rare people, a real Western Union delivery boy on a real bike. He signed for the telegram and was about to shut the door when he saw the lad staring fixedly at the Möbius Machine.

“What,” exclaimed the boy, eyes wide, “is that?”

Harrison Cooper stood aside and let the boy wander in a great circle around his Machine, his eyes dancing up, over, and around the immense circling figure eight of shining copper, brass, and silver.

“Sure!” cried the boy at last, beaming. “A Time Machine!”

“Bull’s-eye!”

“When do you leave?” said the boy. “Where will you go to meet which person where? Alexander? Caesar? Napoleon! Hitler?!”

“No, no!”

The boy exploded his list. “Lincoln—”

“More like it.”

“General Grant! Roosevelt! Benjamin Franklin?”

“Franklin, yes!”

“Aren’t you lucky?”

“Am I?” Stunned, Harrison Cooper found himself nodding. “Yes, by God, and suddenly—”

Suddenly he knew why he had wept at dawn.

He grabbed the young lad’s hand. “Much thanks. You’re a catalyst—”

“Cat—?”

“A Rorschach test—making me draw my own list—now gently, swiftly—out! No offense.”

The door slammed. He ran for his library phone, punched numbers, waited, scanning the thousand books on the shelves.

“Yes, yes,” he murmured, his eyes flicking over the gorgeous sun-bright titles. “Some of you. Two, three, maybe four. Hello! Sam? Samuel! Can you get here in five minutes, make it three? Dire emergency. Come!”

He slammed the phone, swiveled to reach out and touch.

“Shakespeare,” he murmured. “Willy-William, will it be—you?”

The laboratory door opened and Sam/Samuel stuck his head in and froze.

For there, seated in the midst of his great Möbius figure eight, leather jacket and boots shined, picnic lunch packed, was Harrison Cooper, arms flexed, elbows out, fingers alert to the computer controls.

“Where’s your Lindbergh cap and goggles?” asked Samuel.

Harrison Cooper dug them out, put them on, smirking.

“Raise the Titanic, then sink it!” Samuel strode to the lovely machine to confront its rather outré occupant. “Well, Cooper, what?” he cried.

“I woke this morning in tears.”

“Sure. I read the phone book aloud last night. That did it!”

“No. You read me these!”

Cooper handed the books over.

“Sure! We gabbed till three, drunk as owls on English Lit!”

“To give me tears for answers!”

“To what?”

“To their loss. To the fact that they died unknown, unrecognized; to the grim fact that some were only truly recognized, republished, raved over from 1920 on!”

“Cut the cackle and move the buns,” said Samuel. “Did you call to sermonize or ask advice?”

Harrison Cooper leaped from his machine and elbowed Samuel into the library.

“You must map my trip for me!”

“Trip? Trip!”

“I go a-journeying, far-traveling, the Grand Literary Tour. A Salvation Army of one!”

“To save lives?”

“No, souls! What good is life if the soul’s dead? Sit! Tell me all the authors we raved on by night to weep me at dawn. Here’s brandy. Drink! Remember?”

“I do!”

“List them, then! The New England Melancholic first. Sad, recluse from land, should have drowned at sea, a lost soul of sixty! Now, what other sad geniuses did we maunder over—”

“God!” Samuel cried. “You’re going to tour them? Oh, Harrison, Harry, I love you!”

“Shut up! Remember how you write jokes? Laugh and think backward! So let us cry and leap up our tear ducts to the source. Weep for Whales to find minnows!”

“Last night I think I quoted—”

“Yes?”

“And then we spoke—”

“Go on—”

“Well.”

Samuel gulped his brandy. Fire burned his eyes.

“Write this down!”

They wrote and ran.

“What will you do when you get there, Librarian Doctor?”

Harrison Cooper, seated back in the shadow of the great hovering Möbius ribbon, laughed and nodded. “Yes! Harrison Cooper, L.M.D. Literary Meadow Doctor. Curer of fine old lions off their feed, in dire need of tender love, small applause, the wine of words, all in my heart, all on my tongue. Say ‘Ah!’ So long. Good-bye!”

“God bless!”

He slammed a lever, whirled a knob, and the machine, in a spiral of metal, a whisk of butterfly ribbon, very simply—vanished.

A moment later, the Möbius Machine gave a twist of its atoms and—returned.

“Voilà!” cried Harrison Cooper, pink-faced and wild-eyed. “It’s done!”

“So soon?” exclaimed his friend Samuel.

“A minute here, but hours there!”

“Did you succeed?”

“Look! Proof positive.”

For tears dripped off his chin.

“What happened? What?!”

“This, and this . . .and... this!”

A gyroscope spun, a celebratory ribbon spiraled endlessly on itself, and the ghost of a massive window curtain haunted the air, exhaled, and then ceased.

As if fallen from a delivery-chute, the books arrived almost before the footfalls and then the half-seen feet and then the fog-wrapped legs and body and at last the head of a man who, as the ribbon spiraled itself back into emptiness, crouched over the volumes as if warming himself at a hearth.

He touched the books and listened to the air in the dim hallway where dinnertime voices drifted up from below and a door stood wide near his elbow, from which the faint scent of illness came and went, arrived and departed, with the stilted breathing of some patient within the room.

Plates and silverware sounded from the world of evening and quiet good health downstairs. The hall and the sickroom were for a time deserted. In a moment, someone might ascend with a tray for the half-sleeping man in the intemperate room.

Harrison Cooper rose with stealth, checking the stairwell, and then, carrying a sweet burden of books, moved into the room, where candles lit both sides of a bed on which the dying man lay supine, arms straight at his sides, head weighting the pillow, eyes grimaced shut, mouth set as if daring the ceiling, mortality itself, to sink and extinguish him.

At the first touch of the books, now on one side, now on the other, of his bed, the old man's eyelids fluttered, his dry lips cracked; the air whistled from his nostrils:

"Who's there?" he whispered. "What time is it?"

"Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth, whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul, then I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can," replied the traveler at the foot of the bed, quietly.

"What, what?" the old man in the bed whispered swiftly.

"It is a way I have of driving off the spleen and regulating the circulation," quoted the visitor, who now moved to place a book under

each of the dying man's hands where his trembling fingers could scratch, pull away, then touch, Braille-like, again.

One by one, the stranger held up book after book, to show the covers, then a page, and yet another title page where printed dates of this novel surfed up, adrift, but to stay forever on some far future shore.

The sick man's eyes lingered over the covers, the titles, the dates, and then fixed to his visitor's bright face. He exhaled, stunned. "My God, you have the look of a traveler. From where?"

"Do the years show?" Harrison Cooper leaned forward. "Well, then—I bring you an Annunciation."

"Such things come to pass only with virgins," whispered the old man.

"No virgin lies here buried under his unread books."

"I come to unbury you. I bring tidings from a far place."

The sick man's eyes moved to the books beneath his trembling hands. "Mine?" he whispered.

The traveler nodded solemnly, but began to smile when the color in the old man's face grew warmer and the expression in his eyes and on his mouth was suddenly eager.

"Is there hope, then?"

"There is!"

"I believe you." The old man took a breath and then wondered, "Why?"

"Because," said the stranger at the foot of the bed, "I love you."

"I do not know you, sir!"

"But I know you fore and aft, port to starboard, main-topgallants to gunnels, every day in your long life to here!"

"Oh, the sweet sound!" cried the old man. "Every word that you say, every light from your eyes, is foundation-of-the-world true! How can it be?" Tears winked from the old man's lids. "Why?"

“Because I am the truth,” said the traveler. “I have come a long way to find and say: you are not lost. Your great Beast has only drowned some little while. In another year, lost ahead, great and glorious, plain and simple men will gather at your grave and shout: he breaches, he rises, he breaches, he rises! and the white shape will surface to the light, the great terror lift into the storm and thunderous St. Elmo’s fire and you with him, each bound to each, and no way to tell where he stops and you start or where you stop and he goes off around the world lifting a fleet of libraries in his and your wake through nameless seas of sub-sub-librarians and readers mobbing the docks to chart your far journeyings, alert for your lost cries at three of a wild morn.”

“Christ’s wounds!” said the man in his winding-sheet bedclothes. “To the point, man, the point! Do you speak truth!?”

“I give you my hand on it, and pledge my soul and my heart’s blood.” The visitor moved to do just this, and the two men’s fists fused as one. “Take these gifts to the grave. Count these pages like a rosary in your last hours.

Tell no one where they came from. Scoffers would knock the ritual beads from your fingers. So tell this rosary in the dark before dawn, and the rosary is this: you will live forever. You are immortal.”

“No more of this, no more! Be still.”

“I can not. Hear me. Where you have passed a fire path will burn, miraculous in the Bengal Bay, the Indian Seas, Hope’s Cape, and around the Horn, past perdition’s landfall, as far as living eyes can see.”

He gripped the old man’s fist ever more tightly.

“I swear. In the years ahead, a million millions will crowd your grave to sleep you well and warm your bones. Do you hear?”

“Great God, you are a proper priest to sound my Last Rites. And will I enjoy my own funeral? I will.”

His hands, freed, clung to the books at each side, as the ardent visitor raised yet other books and intoned the dates:

“Nineteen twenty-two . . . 1930 . . . 1935 . . . 1940 . . . 1955 . . . 1970.
Can you read and know what it means?”

He held the last volume close to the old man’s face. The fiery eyes moved. The old mouth creaked.

“Nineteen ninety?”

“Yours. One hundred years from tonight.”

“Dear God!”

“I must go, but I would hear. Chapter One. Speak.”

The old man’s eyes slid and burned. He licked his lips, traced the words, and at last whispered, beginning to weep:

““Call me Ishmael.””

There was snow and more snow and more snow after that. In the dissolving whiteness, the silver ribbon twirled in a massive whisper to let forth in an exhalation of Time the journeying librarian and his bookbag.

As if slicing white bread rinsed by snow, the ribbon, as the traveler ghosted himself to flesh, sifted him through the hospital wall into a room as white as December.

There, abandoned, lay a man as pale as the snow and the wind. Almost young, he slept with his mustaches oiled to his lip by fever. He seemed not to know nor care that a messenger had invaded the air near his bed.

His eyes did not stir, nor did his mouth increase the passage of breath. His hands at his sides did not open to receive. He seemed already lost in a tomb and only his unexpected visitor’s voice caused his eyes to roll behind their shut lids.

"Are you forgotten?" a voice asked.

"Unborn," the pale man replied.

"Never remembered?"

"Only. Only in. France."

"Wrote nothing at all?"

"Not worthy."

"Feel the weight of what I place on your bed. No, don't look. Feel."

"Tombstones."

"With names, yes, but not tombstones. Not marble but paper. Dates, yes, but the day after tomorrow and tomorrow and ten thousand after that. And your name on each."

"It will not be."

"Is. Let me speak the names. Listen. Masque?"

"Red Death."

"The Fall of—"

"Usher!"

"Pit?"

"Pendulum!"

"Tell-tale?"

"Heart! My heart. Heart!"

"Repeat: for the love of God, Montresor."

"Silly."

"Repeat: Montresor, for the love of God."

"For the love of God, Montresor!"

"Do you see this label?"

"I see!"

"Read the date."

"Nineteen ninety-four. No such date."

"Again, and the name of the wine."

"Nineteen ninety-four. Amontillado. And my name!"

“Yes! Now shake your head. Make the fool’s-cap bells ring. Here’s mortar for the last brick. Quickly. I’m here to bury you alive with books. When death comes, how will you greet him? With a shout and—?”

“Requiescat in pace?”

“Say it again.”

“Requiescat in pace!”

The Time Wind roared, the room emptied. Nurses ran in, summoned by laughter, and tried to seize the books that weighed down his joy.

“What’s he saying?” someone cried.

In Paris, an hour, a day, a year, a minute later, there was a run of St. Elmo’s fire along a church steeple, a blue glow in a dark alley, a soft tread at a street corner, a turnabout of wind like an invisible carousel, and then footfalls up a stair to a door which opened on a bedroom where a window looked out upon cafes filled with people and far music, and in a bed by the window, a tall man lying, his pale face immobile, until he heard alien breath in his room.

The shadow of a man stood over him and now leaned down so that the light from the window revealed a face and a mouth as it inhaled and then spoke. The single word that the mouth said was:

“Oscar?”

The End