



No Particular Night or Morning, Ray Bradbury

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HE HAD smoked a packet of cigarettes in two hours.

"How far out in space are we?"

"A billion miles."

"A billion miles from where?" said Hitchcock

"It all depends," said Clemens, not smoking at all. "A billion miles from home, you might say."

"Then say it."

"Home. Earth. New York. Chicago. Wherever you were from."

"I don't even remember," said Hitchcock. "I don't even believe there is an Earth now, do you?"

"Yes," said Clemens. "I dreamt about it this morning."

"There is no morning in space."

"During the night then."

"It's always night," said Hitchcock quietly. "Which night do you mean?"

"Shut up," said Clemens irritably. "Let me finish." Hitchcock lit another cigarette. His hand did not shake, but it looked as if, inside the sunburned flesh, it might be trembling all to itself, a small tremor in each hand and a large invisible tremor in his body. The two men sat on the observation corridor floor, looking out at the stars. Clemens's eyes flashed, but Hitchcock's eyes focused on nothing; they were blank and puzzled.

"I woke up at 0500 hours myself," said Hitchcock, as if he were talking to his right hand. "And I heard myself screaming, 'Where am I? where am I?' And the answer was 'Nowhere!' And I said, 'Where've I been?'"

And I said, 'Earth!' 'What's Earth?' I wondered. 'Where I was born,' I said. But it was nothing and worse than nothing. I don't believe in anything I can't see or hear or touch. I can't see Earth, so why should I believe in it? It's safer this way, not to believe."

"There's Earth." Clemens pointed, smiling. "That point of light there."
"That's not Earth; that's our sun. You can't see Earth from here."
"I can see it. I have a good memory."

"It's not the same, you fool," said Hitchcock suddenly. There was a touch of anger in his voice. "I mean see it. I've always been that way. When I'm in Boston, New York is dead. When I'm in New York, Boston is dead. When I don't see a man for a day, he's dead. When he comes walking down the street, my God, it's a resurrection. I do a dance, almost, I'm so glad to see him. I used to, anyway. I don't dance any more. I just look. And when the man walks off, he's dead again."

Clemens laughed. "It's simply that your mind works on a primitive level. You can't hold to things. You've got no imagination, Hitchcock old man. You've got to learn to hold on."

"Why should I hold onto things I can't use?" said Hitchcock, his eyes wide, still staring into space. "I'm practical. If Earth isn't here for me to walk on, you want me to walk on a memory? That hurts. Memories, as my father once said, are porcupines. To hell with them! Stay away from them. They make you unhappy. They ruin your work. They make you cry."

"I'm walking on Earth right now," said Clemens, squinting to himself, blowing smoke.

"You're kicking porcupines. Later in the day you won't be able to eat lunch, and you'll wonder why," said Hitchcock in a dead voice. "And it'll be because you've got a footful of quills aching in you."

To hell with it! If I can't drink it, pinch it, punch it, or lie on it, then I say drop it in the sun. I'm dead to Earth. It's dead to me. There's no one in

New York weeping for me tonight. Shove New York. There isn't any season here; winter and summer are gone.

So is spring, and autumn. It isn't any particular night or morning; it's space and space. The only thing right now is you and me and this rocket ship. And the only thing I'm positive of is me. That's all of it."

Clemens ignored this. "I'm putting a nickel in the phone slot right now," he said, pantomiming it with a slow smile. "And calling my girl in Evanston. Hello, Barbara!"

The rocket sailed on through space.

The lunch bell rang at 1305 hours. The men ran by on soft rubber sneakers and sat at the cushioned tables.

Clemens wasn't hungry.

"See, what did I tell you!" said Hitchcock. "You and your damned porcupines! Leave them alone, like I told you. Look at me, shoveling away food." He said this with a mechanical, slow, and unhumorous voice. "Watch me." He put a big piece of pie in his mouth and felt it with his tongue. He looked at the pie on his plate as if to see the texture. He moved it with his fork. He felt the fork handle.

He mashed the lemon filling and watched it jet up between the tines. Then he touched a bottle of milk all over and poured out half a quart into a glass, listening to it. He looked at the milk as if to make it whiter.

He drank the milk so swiftly that he couldn't have tasted it. He had eaten his entire lunch in a few minutes, cramming it in feverishly, and now he looked around for more, but it was gone. He gazed out the window of the rocket, blankly. "Those aren't real, either," he said.

"What?" asked Clemens.

"The stars. Who's ever touched one? I can see them, sure, but what's the use of seeing a thing that's a million or a billion miles away? Anything that far off isn't worth bothering with."

"Why did you come on this trip?" asked Clemens suddenly.

Hitchcock peered into his amazingly empty milk glass and clenched it tight, then relaxed his hand and clenched it again. "I don't know." He ran his tongue on the glass rim. "I just had to, is all. How do you know why you do anything in this life?"

"You liked the idea of space travel? Going places?"

"I don't know. Yes. No. It wasn't going places. It was being between." Hitchcock for the first time tried to focus his eyes upon something, but it was so nebulous and far off that his eyes couldn't make the adjustment, though he worked his face and hands. "Mostly it was space. So much space. I liked the idea of nothing on top, nothing on the bottom, and a lot of nothing in between, and me in the middle of the nothing."

"I never heard it put that way before."

"I just put it that way; I hope you listened."

Hitchcock took out his cigarettes and lit up and began to suck and blow the smoke, again and again.

Clemens said, "What sort of childhood did you have, Hitchcock?"

"I was never young. Whoever I was then is dead. That's more of your quills. I don't want a hide full, thanks. I've always figured it that you die each day and each day is a box, you see, all numbered and neat; but never go back and lift the lids, because you've died a couple of thousand times in your life, and that's a lot of corpses, each dead a different way, each with a worse expression. Each of those days is a different you, somebody you don't know or understand or want to understand."

"You're cutting yourself off, that way."

"Why should I have anything to do with that younger Hitchcock? He was a fool, and he was yanked around and taken advantage of and used. His father was no good, and he was glad when his mother died,

because she was the same. Should I go back and see his face on that day and gloat over it? He was a fool.”

“We’re all fools,” said Clemens, “all the time. It’s just we’re a different kind each day. We think, I’m not a fool today. I’ve learned my lesson. I was a fool yesterday but not this morning. Then tomorrow we find out that, yes, we were a fool today too. I think the only way we can grow and get on in this world is to accept the fact we’re not perfect and live accordingly.”

“I don’t want to remember imperfect things,” said Hitchcock. “I can’t shake hands with that younger Hitchcock, can I? Where he? Can you find him for me? He’s dead, so to hell with him! I won’t shape what I do tomorrow by some lousy thing I did yesterday.”

“You’ve got it wrong.”

“Let me have it then.” Hitchcock sat, finished with his meal, looking out the port. The other men glanced at him.

“Do meteors exist?” asked Hitchcock.

“You know damn well they do.”

“In our radar machines—yes, as streaks of light in space. No, I don’t believe in anything that doesn’t exist and act in my presence. Sometimes”—he nodded at the men finishing their food—“sometimes I don’t believe in anyone or anything but me.” He sat up. “Is there an upstairs to this ship?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve got to see it immediately.”

“Don’t get excited.”

“You wait here; I’ll be right back.” Hitchcock walked out swiftly. The other men sat nibbling their food slowly. A moment passed. One of the men raised his head. “How long’s this been going on? I mean Hitchcock.”

“Just today.”

“He acted funny the other day too.”

“Yes, but it’s worse today.”

“Has anyone told the psychiatrist?”

“We thought he’d come out of it. Everyone has a little touch of space the first time out. I’ve had it. You get wildly philosophical, then frightened. You break into a sweat, then you doubt your parentage, you don’t believe in Earth, you get drunk, wake up with a hang-over, and that’s it.”

“But Hitchcock don’t get drunk,” said someone. “I wish he would.”

“How’d he ever get past the examining board?”

“How’d we all get past? They need men. Space scares the hell out of most people. So the board lets a lot of borderlines through.”

“That man isn’t a borderline,” said someone. “He’s a fall-off-a-cliff-and-no-bottom-to-hit.”

They waited for five minutes. Hitchcock didn’t come back. Clemens finally got up and went out and climbed the circular stair to the flight deck above. Hitchcock was there, touching the wall tenderly.

“It’s here,” he said.

“Of course it is.”

“I was afraid it might not be.” Hitchcock peered at Clemens. “And you’re alive.”

“I have been for a long time.”

“No,” said Hitchcock. “Now, just now, this instant, while you’re here with me, you’re alive. A moment ago you weren’t anything.”

“I was to me,” said the other.

“That’s not important. You weren’t here with me,” said Hitchcock.

“Only that’s important. Is the crew down below?”

“Yes.”

“Can you prove it?”

“Look, Hitchcock, you’d better see Dr. Edwards. I think you need a little servicing.”

“No, I’m all right. Who’s the doctor, anyway? Can you prove he’s on this ship?”

“I can. All I have to do is call him.”

“No. I mean, standing here, in this instant, you can’t prove he’s here, can you?”

“Not without moving, I can’t.”

“You see. You have no mental evidence. That’s what I want, a mental evidence I can feel. I don’t want physical evidence, proof you have to go out and drag in. I want evidence that you can carry in your mind and always touch and smell and feel. But there’s no way to do that. In order to believe in a thing you’ve got to carry it with you. You can’t carry the Earth, or a man, in your pocket.

I want a way to do that, carry things with me always, so I can believe in them. How clumsy to have to go to all the trouble of going out and bringing in something terribly physical to prove something. I hate physical things because they can be left behind and become impossible to believe in then.”

“Those are the rules of the game.”

“I want to change them. Wouldn’t it be fine if we could prove things with our mind, and know for certain that things are always in their place. I’d like to know what a place is like when I’m not there. I’d like to be sure.”

“That’s not possible.”

“You know,” said Hitchcock, “I first got the idea of coming out into space about five years ago. About the time I lost my job. Did you know I wanted to be a writer? Oh yes, one of those men who always talk about writing but rarely write.

And too much temper. So I lost my good job and left the editorial business and couldn't get another job and went on down hill. Then my wife died. You see, nothing stays where you put it—you can't trust material things. I had to put my boy in an aunt's trust, and things got worse; then one day I had a story published with my name on it, but it wasn't me."

"I don't get you."

Hitchcock's face was pale and sweating.

"I can only say that I looked at the page with my name under the title. By Joseph Hitchcock. But it was some other man. There was no way to prove—actually prove, really prove—that that man was me.

The story was familiar—I knew I had written it—but that name on the paper still was not me. It was a symbol, a name. It was alien. And then I realized that even if I did become successful at writing, it would never mean a thing to me, because I couldn't identify myself with that name.

It would be soot and ashes. So I didn't write any more. I was never sure, anyway, that the stories I had in my desk a few days later were mine, though I remembered typing them. There was always that gap of proof. That gap between doing and having done. What is done is dead and is not proof, for it is not an action. Only actions are important.

And pieces of paper were remains of actions done and over and now unseen. The proof of doing was over and done. Nothing but memory remained, and I didn't trust my memory. Could I actually prove I'd written these stories? No. Can any author? I mean proof. I mean action as proof.

No. Not really. Not unless someone sits in the room while you type, and then maybe you're doing it from memory. And once a thing is accomplished there is no proof, only memory. So then I began to find gaps between everything. I doubted I was married or had a child or ever had a job in my life.

I doubted that I had been born in Illinois and had a drunken father and swinish mother. I couldn't prove anything. Oh yes, people could say, 'You are thus and so and such and such,' but that was nothing."

"You should get your mind off stuff like that," said Clemens. "I can't. All the gaps and spaces. And that's how I got to thinking about the stars. I thought how I'd like to be in a rocket ship, in space, in nothing, in nothing, going on into nothing, with just a thin something, a thin eggshell of metal holding me, going on away from all the somethings with gaps in them that couldn't prove themselves. I knew then that the only happiness for me was space. When I get to Aldebaran II I'll sign up to return on the five-year journey to Earth and so go back and forth like a shuttlecock all the rest of my life."

"Have you talked about this to the psychiatrist?"

"So he could try to mortar up the gaps for me, fill in the gulfs with noise and warm water and words and hands touching me, and all that? No, thanks." Hitchcock stopped. "I'm getting worse, aren't I? I thought so. This morning when I woke up I thought, I'm getting worse. Or is it better?" He paused again and cocked an eye at Clemens. "Are you there? Are you really there? Go on, prove it."

Clemens slapped him on the arm, hard.

"Yes," said Hitchcock, rubbing his arm, looking at it very thoroughly, wonderingly, massaging it. "You were there. For a brief fraction of an instant. But I wonder if you are—now.

"See you later," said Clemens. He was on his way to find the doctor. He walked away.

A bell rang. Two bells, three bells rang. The ship rocked as if a hand had slapped it. There was a sucking sound, the sound of a vacuum cleaner turned on. Clemens heard the screams and felt the air thin. The air hissed away about his ears. Suddenly there was nothing in his nose or lungs. He stumbled and then the hissing stopped.

He heard someone cry, "A meteor." Another said, "It's patched!" And this was true. The ship's emergency spider, running over the outside of the hull, had slapped a hot patch on the hole in the metal and welded it tight.

Someone was talking and talking and then beginning to shout at a distance. Clemens ran along the corridor through the freshening, thickening air. As he turned in at a bulkhead he saw the hole in the steel wall, freshly sealed; he saw the meteor fragments lying about the room like bits of a toy. He saw the captain and the members of the crew and a man lying on the floor.

It was Hitchcock. His eyes were closed and he was crying. "It tried to kill me," he said, over and over. "It tried to kill me." They got him on his feet. "It can't do that," said Hitchcock. "That's not how it should be. Things like that can't happen, can they? It came in after me. Why did it do that?"

"All right, all right Hitchcock," said the captain.

The doctor was bandaging a small cut on Hitchcock's arm. Hitchcock looked up, his face pale, and saw Clemens there looking at him. "It tried to kill me," he said.

"I know," said Clemens.

Seventeen hours passed. The ship moved on in space.

Clemens stepped through a bulkhead and waited. The psychiatrist and the captain were there. Hitchcock sat on the floor with his legs drawn up to his chest, arms wrapped tight about them.

"Hitchcock," said the captain.

No answer.

"Hitchcock, listen to me," said the psychiatrist.

They turned to Clemens. "You're his friend?"

"Yes."

“Do you want to help us?”

“If I can.”

“It was that damned meteor,” said the captain. “This might not have happened if it hadn’t been for that.”

“It would’ve come anyway, sooner or later,” said the doctor. To Clemens: “You might talk to him.”

Clemens walked quietly over and crouched by Hitchcock and began to shake his arm gently, calling in a low voice, “Hey there, Hitchcock.”
No reply.

“Hey, it’s me. Me, Clemens,” said Clemens. “Look, I’m here.” He gave the arm a little slap. He massaged the rigid neck, gently, and the back of the bent-down head. He glanced at the psychiatrist, who sighed very softly. The captain shrugged.

“Shock treatment, Doctor?”

The psychiatrist nodded. “We’ll start within the hour.” Yes, thought Clemens, shock treatment. Play a dozen jazz records for him, wave a bottle of fresh green chlorophyll and dandelions under his nose, put grass under his feet, squirt Chanel on the air, cut his hair, clip his fingernails, bring him a woman, shout, bang and crash at him, fry him with electricity, fill the gap and the gulf, but where’s your proof?

You can’t keep proving to him forever. You can’t entertain a baby with rattles and sirens all night every night for the next thirty years. Sometime you’ve got to stop. When you do that, he’s lost again. That is, if he pays any attention to you at all.

“Hitchcock!” he cried, as loud as he could, almost frantically, as if he himself were falling over a cliff. “It’s me. It’s your pal! Hey!”

Clemens turned and walked away out of the silent room.

Twelve hours later another alarm bell rang.

After all of the running had died down, the captain explained:
“Hitchcock snapped out of it for a minute or so. He was alone. He climbed into a space suit. He opened an airlock. Then he walked out into space—alone.”

Clemens blinked through the immense glass port, where there was a blur of stars and distant blackness. “He’s out there now?”

“Yes. A million miles behind us. We’d never find him. First time I knew he was outside the ship was when his helmet radio came in on our control-room beam. I heard him talking to himself.”

“What did he say?”

“Something like ‘No more space ship now. Never was any. No people. No people in all the universe. Never were any. No planets. No stars.’ That’s what he said. And then he said something about his hands and feet and legs.

‘No hands,’ he said. ‘I haven’t any hands any more. Never had any. No feet. Never had any. Can’t prove it. No body. Never had any. No lips. No face. No head. Nothing. Only space. Only space. Only the gap.’”

The men turned quietly to look from the glass port out into the remote and cold stars.

Space, thought Clemens. The space that Hitchcock loved so well. Space, with nothing on top, nothing on the bottom, a lot of empty nothings between, and Hitchcock falling in the middle of the nothing, on his way to no particular night and no particular morning. . . .

The End