

One More Body in the Pool, Ray Bradbury

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I walked across the beach and stood in the hot sun for a long moment, staring down at the man lying there with his head covered by a newspaper.

I took a deep breath, held it, and at last said, "Scottie?"

There was no motion beneath the paper.
I took another breath and said, "Mr. Fitzgerald?"

At last the paper drifted aside and the young old man underneath it opened his eyes.

His face was familiar and young and terribly haunted. The cheeks were smooth and the chin was very fine. The eyes, which were clear blue, seemed to have trouble focusing on me.
"Well?" he said at last.

I replied, "God, I hate to bother you, but I'm a sort of literary agent and, well, forgive me, but I have an idea that I want to offer you."
I stopped, blushing at what I'd said, as the newspaper drifted back over the old young face.

I took another breath and blurted, "Scottie."
There was only silence.
"I apologize," I said. "But Mr. Fitzgerald, please."

The paper drifted aside again and he stared up at me, wait-ing patiently.

"This is ridiculous, I know," I said. "Let me find a way to put it. Do you believe that you can travel back in time just by thinking about doing it? I know we all can do this in our minds, but if you keep thinking about

traveling to a specific point in time and then start walking, and keep on walking, oh, a number of days, a number of weeks, maybe you'll really wind up there."

"For God's sake," said the voice under the newspaper. The man shoved the newspaper aside, propped himself up on one elbow, and watched me as if I were the bearer of bad news.

"You don't look half as loony as you sound," he said. "Continue. Just what is it that you want in the middle of a fine afternoon on a beach in south-ern Florida?" I could feel my fingers twitching at my side and I had to stop myself from blinking.

"Well, I've been reading the reviews of your latest book, which upset me terribly. I've read all the reviews of your whole life, for that matter, well, for at least the last ten or fifteen years, and, well, I feel you need a literary friend. Don't get me wrong. I mean no insult. I feel that at a time like this—" I stopped, for I was out of breath.

Fitzgerald looked like he was going to lie back down, which panicked me, but then he must have read something in my face, for he sat up again and examined me.

"You're a very nervy fel-low, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir," I said. "I can't help it. When I like someone's work I feel I should support him. Like is the wrong word. Love is more like it. Tender is the Night is the finest novel written in the last forty years."

"You've just said the right thing."

F. Scott Fitzgerald sat up even further and a smile touched his lips. "Sit down," he said.

I sat down on the warm sand, looked at him quietly, and waited for him to go on.

"Now, just what is it that you want to suggest and why in hell would you want to suggest it?"

"Well," I said, "I have just come from a series of literary travels. First I visited Ernest Hemingway and then I went south and met up with William Faulkner. I won't fill you in on the particulars, as you would probably find them hard to believe, but I will tell you that along the way I came up with ideas for those two and you, because I feel that the three of you have the potential for writing the most popular kind of fiction in the world today." "And what kind of fiction is that?" said F. Scott Fitzgerald.

"Mysteries," I said and stopped, confused. "But no, not anything like Agatha Christie. No, no, that wouldn't do. The murder mystery. I know that sounds strange, but it's become an accepted form among modern writers, and I believe you would bring something special to the field. It's really come into its own just this last half century, but think further back in time. Consider Hamlet, for instance.

It's the greatest play ever written, and it's all about the death of the father—the murder—and the mystery behind it. And by the end the stage floor is littered with bodies; there's hardly anyone left. So you've got killings all over the place and mysteries from start to finish. Part of it scares the hell out of you; part of it provokes you. Think."

F. Scott Fitzgerald waited for me to go on, which compelled him to take out a cigarette and light it and puff, waiting.

I swallowed hard and said, "I chatted with Papa. He was willing to think about ideas and Faulkner, of course, has done some weird stories in his time, so he was open to suggestions."

F. Scott Fitzgerald's eyes had begun to shine somewhat and he turned to a hamper nearby and brought forth a small silver flask.

He offered it to me and I shook my head.

He took a great swig from the silver flask and said, "Suddenly I'm fascinated by what you're telling me. I know this chap, Hammett, and I found his characters in *The Maltese Falcon* fascinating, especially that

fat man—what was his name? Gutmann. But what makes you think I could be a writer of murder mysteries?"

"Well," I said, "if people won't accept you as a literary novelist like I do, and I really do, then perhaps they will accept you as a mystery writer, the critics being what they are."

"What did you say to Papa?" asked F. Scott Fitzgerald.

"I told him that Africa is a wonderful place for someone to get shot in a mysterious manner."

"And did Papa react?"

"He thought it was a very good idea since he's seen a lot of shooting in Africa, accidental and on purpose. He mentioned someone he once knew named Macomber. He even bothered to make a note, which pleased me and made me feel less superfluous."

"And what about the old drunk?"

"Faulkner?"

"That one."

"He has contacts in Hollywood and I told him that he would be a natural to write something of a murder mystery for the screen if he moved ahead in that area."

F. Scott Fitzgerald nodded and took another swig. "And what makes you think I would be a proper writer of such fictions?"

"Because of the people you've known," I said. "You've encountered a much wider swath of characters from every level than Faulkner or Hemingway, men and women from a dozen countries and many strange cities.

You've known the rich and you've known the poor. You've been in and out of the movie studios, where you've been put upon by maniacs who should have been murdered long ago. You know women very well and you know crazy young men and you know the environment in which

they survive, sometimes New York, sometimes Long Island, sometimes Biarritz, or lost away down here in southern Florida.

Your knowledge of the human condition could help you write a terrific murder mystery, if you put your mind to it."

F. Scott Fitzgerald leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. "Are you a literary agent then, as you claim?"

"No, I don't claim that," I said. "I guess you might say I'm a provider, a manufacturer of ideas would be more like it."

"Well then, what sort of idea are you offering me?"

I took a notepad from my pocket and glanced at it.

"Well, sir, I have a title here. The Body in the Pool."

F. Scott Fitzgerald laughed quietly. "That doesn't sound Very original."

"Well, if it's a rich man's body, and a rich man's pool, and the rich man's body has a bullet in it, perhaps that would be more interesting to you," I said. "There's a lot to think about it you find a rich man's bullet-pierced body in a rich man's pool. Everyone would wonder how he had gotten there and why someone would shoot him and how long he'd been in the water before he was found and why he deserved to die at all in such a manner."

F. Scott Fitzgerald glanced at the notepad in my hand and reached out and took it. "Can I keep this?"

"Yes," I said.

He studied the pad, then lit another cigarette and smoked it quietly. "I know you won't believe this," he said, "but my mind has wandered in similar directions in recent years. I got around to reading some Dashiell Hammett last year and it was very good stuff. I've wondered about people like that and what sort of ends they come to."

"Well," I said, "if you accept what I've suggested, I will have done my job. I worry about my favorite authors and their lives and want everything to come out right for them in the end. It seems to me that if

you wrote a murder mystery now, you could reestablish yourself as a first-class writer in American letters, even though people make a good deal of fun about detective stories."

There was a long silence.

The sun somehow seemed brighter and hotter and I felt sweat move down my face.

F. Scott Fitzgerald offered me his silver flask again and this time I took a sip. I winced and handed it back to him, then somehow managed to get to my feet.

Fitzgerald watched me do all this, then suddenly reached out his hand.

I took it and held on, very quietly, because I hated to leave.

I stared down into that young old face and said, "I think it's time for me to go."

"Much thanks for dropping by," said F. Scott Fitzgerald.

I backed off and walked across the sand, waiting for him to say a final thing.

Before I was very far away I heard him call.

I turned and he said thoughtfully, "I was wondering. Wouldn't it be wiser to not have the body in the pool at the start of the story? How about finding the body there at the very end of the novel?"

I hesitated a moment, nodded, and said, "Now you're cooking!"

He raised his flask in a toast to me.

Somehow I managed to turn and walk away.

The End