

# The Burning Man, Ray Bradbury

## The Burning Man

The rickety ford came along a road that plowed up dust in yellow plumes which took an hour to lie back down and move no more in that special slumber that stuns the world in mid-July.

Far away, the lake waited, a cool-blue gem in a hot-green lake of grass, but it was indeed still far away, and Neva and Doug were bucketing along in their barreland of red-hot bolts with lemonade slopping around in a thermos on the back seat and deviled-ham sandwiches fermenting on Doug's lap. Both boy and aunt sucked in hot air and talked out even hotter.

"Fire-eater," said Douglas. "I'm eating fire. Heck, I can hardly wait for that lake!"

Suddenly, up ahead, there was a man by the side of the road.

Shirt open to reveal his bronzed body to the waist, his hair ripened to wheat color by July, the man's eyes burned fiery blue in a nest of sun wrinkles. He waved, dying in the heat.

Neva tromped on the brake. Fierce dust clouds rose to make the man vanish. When the golden dust sifted away his hot yellow eyes glared balefully, like a cat's, defying the weather and the burning wind.

He stared at Douglas.

Douglas glanced away, nervously.

For you could see where the man had come across a field high with yellow grass baked and burned by eight weeks of no rain. There was a path where the man had broken the grass and cleaved a passage to the road. The path went as far as one could see down to a dry swamp and

an empty creek bed with nothing but baked hot stones in it and fried rock and melting sand.

“I’ll be damned, you stopped!” cried the man, angrily.

“I’ll be damned, I did,” Neva yelled back. “Where you going?”

“I’ll think of someplace.” The man hopped up like a cat and swung into the rumble seat. “Get going. It’s after us! The sun, I mean, of course!” He pointed straight up. “Git! Or we’ll all go mad!”

Neva stomped on the gas. The car left gravel and glided on pure white-hot dust, coming down only now and then to careen off a boulder or kiss a stone. They cut the land in half with racket. Above it, the man shouted:

“Put’er up to seventy, eighty, hell, why not ninety!”

Neva gave a quick, critical look at the lion, the intruder in the back seat, to see if she could shut his jaws with a glance. They shut.

And that, of course, is how Doug felt about the beast. Not a stranger, no, not hitchhiker, but intruder. In just two minutes of leaping into the red-hot car, with his jungle hair and jungle smell, he had managed to disingratiate himself with the climate, the automobile, Doug, and the honorable and perspiring aunt. Now she hunched over the wheel and nursed the car through further storms of heat and backlashes of gravel.

Meanwhile, the creature in the back, with his great lion ruff of hair and mint-fresh yellow eyes, licked his lips and looked straight on at Doug in the rearview mirror. He gave a wink. Douglas tried to wink back, but somehow the lid never came down.

“You ever try to figure—” yelled the man.

“What?” cried Neva.

“You ever try to figure,” shouted the man, leaning forward between them “—whether or not the weather is driving you crazy, or you’re crazy already?”

It was a surprise of a question, which suddenly cooled them on this blast-furnace day.

“I don’t quite understand—” said Neva.

“Nor does anyone!” The man smelled like a lion house. His thin arms hung over and down between them, nervously tying and untying an invisible string. He moved as if there were nests of burning hair under each armpit.

“Day like today, all hell breaks loose inside your head. Lucifer was born on a day like this, in a wilderness like this,” said the man. “With just fire and flame and smoke everywhere,” said the man. “And everything so hot you can’t touch it, and people not wanting to be touched,” said the man.

He gave a nudge to her elbow, a nudge to the boy.  
They jumped a mile.

“You see?” The man smiled. “Day like today, you get to thinking lots of things.” He smiled. “Ain’t this the summer when the seventeen-year locusts are supposed to come back like pure holocaust? Simple but multitudinous plagues?”

“Don’t know!” Neva drove fast, staring ahead.

“This is the summer. Holocaust just around the bend. I’m thinking so swift it hurts my eyeballs, cracks my head. I’m liable to explode in a fireball with just plain disconnected thought. Why—why—why—”

Neva swallowed hard. Doug held his breath.

Quite suddenly they were terrified. For the man simply idled on with his talk, looking at the shimmering green fire trees that burned by on both

sides, sniffing the rich hot dust that flailed up around the tin car, his voice neither high nor low, but steady and calm now in describing his life:

“Yes, sir, there’s more to the world than people appreciate. If there can be seventeen-year locusts, why not seventeen-year people? Ever thought of that?”

“Never did,” said someone.

Probably me, thought Doug, for his mouth had moved like a mouse.

“Or how about twenty-four-year people, or fifty-seven-year people? I mean, we’re all so used to people growing up, marrying, having kids, we never stop to think maybe there’s other ways for people coming into the world, maybe like locusts, once in a while, who can tell, one hot day, middle of summer!”

“Who can tell?” There was the mouse again. Doug’s lips trembled.

“And who’s to say there ain’t genetic evil in the world?” asked the man of the sun, glaring right up at it without blinking.

“What kind of evil?” asked Neva.

“Genetic, ma’am. In the blood, that is to say. People born evil, grewed evil, died evil, no changes all the way down the line.”

“Whew!” said Douglas. “You mean people who start out mean and stay at it?”

“You got the sum, boy. Why not? If there are people everyone thinks are angel-fine from their first sweet breath to their last pure declaration, why not sheer orneriness from January first to December, three hundred sixty-five days later?”

“I never thought of that,” said the mouse.

“Think,” said the man. “Think.”

They thought for above five seconds.

“Now,” said the man, squinting one eye at the cool lake five miles ahead, his other eye shut into darkness and ruminating on coal-bins of fact there, “listen. What if the intense heat, I mean the really hot hot heat of a month like this, week like this, day like today, just baked the Ornerly Man right out of the river mud.

Been there buried in the mud for forty-seven years, like a damn larva, waiting to be born. And he shook himself awake and looked around, full grown, and climbed out of the hot mud into the world and said, ‘I think I’ll eat me some summer.’”

“How’s that again?”

“Eat me some summer, boy, summer, ma’am. Just devour it whole. Look at them trees, ain’t they a whole dinner? Look at that field of wheat, ain’t that a feast? Them sunflowers by the road, by golly, there’s breakfast. Tarpaper on top that house, there’s lunch. And the lake, way up ahead, Jehoshaphat, that’s dinner wine, drink it all!”

“I’m thirsty, all right,” said Doug.

“Thirsty, hell, boy, thirst don’t begin to describe the state of a man, come to think about him, come to talk, who’s been waiting in the hot mud thirty years and is born but to die in one day! Thirst! Ye Gods! Your ignorance is complete.”

“Well,” said Doug.

“Well,” said the man. “Not only thirst but hunger. Hunger. Look around. Not only eat the trees and then the flowers blazing by the roads but then the white-hot panting dogs. There’s one. There’s another! And all the cats in the country.

There’s two, just passed three! And then just glutton-happy begin to why, why not, begin to get around to, let me tell you, how’s this strike you, eat people? I mean—people! Fried, cooked, boiled, and parboiled people. Sunburned beauties of people.

Old men, young. Old ladies' hats and then old ladies under their hats and then young ladies' scarves and young ladies, and then young boys' swim-trunks, by God, and young boys, elbows, ankles, ears, toes, and eyebrows! Eyebrows, by God, men, women, boys, ladies, dogs, fill up the menu, sharpen your teeth, lick your lips, dinner's on!"

"Wait!" someone cried.

Not me, thought Doug. I said nothing.

"Hold on!" someone yelled.

It was Neva.

He saw her knee fly up as if by intuition and down as if by finalized gumption.

Stomp! went her heel on the floor.

The car braked. Neva had the door open, pointing, shouting, pointing, shouting, her mouth flapping, one hand seized out to grab the man's shirt and rip it.

"Out! Get out!"

"Here, ma'am?" The man was astonished.

"Here, here, here, out, out, out!"

"But, ma'am . . .!"

"Out, or you're finished, through!" cried Neva, wildly. "I got a load of Bibles in the back trunk, a pistol with a silver bullet here under the steering wheel. A box of crucifixes under the seat!

A wooden stake taped to the axle, with a hammer. I got holy water in the carburetor, blessed before it boiled early this morning at three churches on the way: St. Matthew's Catholic, the Green Town Baptist, and the Zion City High Episcopal.

The steam from that will get you alone. Following us, one mile behind, and due to arrive in one minute, is the Reverend Bishop Kelly from Chicago. Up at the lake is Father Rooney from Milwaukee, and Doug,

why, Doug here has in his back pocket at this minute one sprig of wolfsbane and two chunks of mandrake root. Out! out! out!”

“Why, ma’am,” cried the man. “I am!”

And he was.

He landed and fell rolling in the road.

Neva banged the car into full flight.

Behind, the man picked himself up and yelled, “You must be nuts. You must be crazy. Nuts. Crazy.”

“I’m nuts? I’m crazy?” said Neva, and hooted. “Boy!”

“. . . nuts . . . crazy . . .” The voice faded.

Douglas looked back and saw the man shaking his fist, then ripping off his shirt and hurling it to the gravel and jumping big puffs of white-hot dust out of it with his bare feet.

The car exploded, rushed, raced, banged pell-mell ahead, his aunt ferociously glued to the hot wheel, until the little sweating figure of the talking man was lost in sun-drenched marshland and burning air. At last Doug exhaled:

“Neva, I never heard you talk like that before.”

“And never will again, Doug.”

“Was what you said true?”

“Not a word.”

“You lied, I mean, you lied?”

“I lied.” Neva blinked. “Do you think he was lying, too?”

“I don’t know.”

“All I know is sometimes it takes a lie to kill a lie, Doug. This time, anyway. Don’t let it become customary.”

“No, ma’am.” He began to laugh. “Say the thing about mandrake root again. Say the thing about wolfsbane in my pocket. Say it about a pistol with a silver bullet, say it.”

She said it. They both began to laugh.

Whooping and shouting, they went away in their tin-bucket-junking car over the gravel ruts and humps, her saying, him listening, eyes squeezed shut, roaring, snickering, raving.

They didn’t stop laughing until they hit the water in their bathing suits and came up all smiles.

The sun stood hot in the middle of the sky and they dog-paddled happily for five minutes before they began to really swim in the menthol-cool waves.

Only at dusk when the sun was suddenly gone and the shadows moved out from the trees did they remember that now they had to go back down that lonely road through all the dark places and past that empty swamp to get to town.

They stood by the car and looked down that long road. Doug swallowed hard.

“Nothing can happen to us going home.”

“Nothing.”

“Jump!”

They hit the seats and Neva kicked the starter like it was a dead dog and they were off.

They drove along under plum-colored trees and among velvet purple hills.

And nothing happened.

They drove along a wide raw gravel road that was turning the color of plums and smelled the warm-cool air that was like lilacs and looked at each other, waiting.



And nothing happened.  
Neva began at last to hum under her breath.  
The road was empty.

And then it was not empty.  
Neva laughed. Douglas squinted and laughed with her.

For there was a small boy, nine years old maybe, dressed in a vanilla-white summer suit, with white shoes and a white tie and his face pink and scrubbed, waiting by the side of the road. He waved.

Neva braked the car.  
“Going in to town?” called the boy, cheerily. “Got lost. Folks at a picnic, left without me. Sure glad you came along. It’s spooky out here.”  
“Climb in!”

The boy climbed and they were off, the boy in the back seat, and Doug and Neva up front glancing at him, laughing, and then getting quiet.

The small boy kept silent for a long while behind them, sitting straight upright and clean and bright and fresh and new in his white suit.

And they drove along the empty road under a sky that was dark now with a few stars and the wind getting cool.

And at last the boy spoke and said something that Doug didn’t hear but he saw Neva stiffen and her face grow as pale as the ice cream from which the small boy’s suit was cut.  
“What?” asked Doug, glancing back.

The small boy stared directly at him, not blinking, and his mouth moved all to itself as if it were separate from his face.

The car’s engine missed fire and died.  
They were slowing to a dead stop.

Doug saw Neva kicking and fiddling at the gas and the starter. But most of all he heard the small boy say, in the new and permanent silence:  
“Have either of you ever wondered—”

The boy took a breath and finished:  
“—if there is such a thing as genetic evil in the world?”

The end