



The Dead Man, Ray Bradbury

The Dead Man

That's the man, right over there," said Mrs. Ribmoll, nodding across the street. "See that man perched on the tar barrel afront Mr. Jenkins' Odd Martin."

Odd Martin.

"The one that says he's dead?" cried Arthur.

Mrs. Ribmoll nodded. "Crazy as a weasel down a chimney. Carries on firm about how he's been dead since the flood and nobody appreciates."

"I see him sitting there every day," cried Arthur.

"Oh yes, he sits there, he does. Sits there and stares at nothing. I say it's a crying shame they don't throw him in jail."

Arthur made a face at the man. "Yah!"

"Never mind, he won't notice you. Most uncivil man I ever seen. Nothing pleased him." She yanked Arthur's arm. "Come on, sonny, we got shopping to do."

They passed on up the street past the barber shop. In the window, after they'd gone by, stood Mr. Simpson, sniping his blue shears and chewing his tasteless gum. He squinted thoughtfully out through the fly-specked glass, looking at the man sitting over there on the tar barrel.

"I figure the best thing could happen to Odd Martin would be to get married," he figured. His eyes glinted slyly. Over his shoulder he looked at his manicurist, Miss Weldon, who was busy burnishing the scraggly fingernails of a farmer named Gilpatrick. Miss Weldon, at this

suggestion, did not look up. She had heard it often. They were always ragging her about Odd Martin.

Mr. Simpson walked back and started work on Gilpatrick's dusty hair again. Gilpatrick chuckled softly. "What woman would marry Odd? Sometimes I almost believe he is dead. He's got an awful odor to him."

Miss Weldon looked up into Mr. Gilpatrick's face and carefully cut his finger with one of her little scalpels. "Gol darn it!" "Watch what you're doing, woman!"

Miss Weldon looked at him with calm little blue eyes in a small white face. Her hair was mouse-brown; she wore no make-up and talked to no one most of the time.

Mr. Simpson cackled and snicked his blue steel shears. "Hope, hope, hope!" he laughed like that. "Miss Weldon, she knows what she's doin', Gilpatrick. You just be careful. Miss Weldon, she give a bottle of eau de cologne to Odd Martin last Christmas. It helped cover up his smell."

Miss Weldon laid down her instruments.

"Sorry, Miss Weldon," apologized Mr. Simpson. "I won't say no more."

Reluctantly, she took up her instruments again.

"Hey, there he goes again!" cried one of the four other men waiting in the shop. Mr. Simpson whirled, almost taking Gilpatrick's pink ear with him in his shears. "Come look, boys!"

Across the street the sheriff stepped out of his office door just then and he saw it happen, too. He saw what Odd Martin was doing.

Everybody came running from all the little stores.

The sheriff arrived and looked down into the gutter.

"Come on now, Odd Martin, come on now," he shouted. He poked down into the gutter with his shiny black boot-tip. "Come on, get up."

You're not dead. You're good as me. You'll catch your death of cold there with all them gum wrappers and cigar butts! Come on, get up!"

Mr. Simpson arrived on the scene and looked at Odd Martin lying there. "He looks like a carton of milk."

"He's takin' up valuable parkin' space for cars, this bein' Friday mornin'," whined the sheriff. "And lots of people needin' the area. Here now, Odd. Hmm. Well, give me a hand here, boys."

They laid the body on the sidewalk.

"Let him stay here," declared the sheriff, jostling around in his boots. "Just let him stay till he gets tired of layin'. He's done this a million times before. Likes the publicity. Git, you kids!"

He sent a bunch of children scuttling ahead of his cheek of tobacco.

Back in the barber shop, Simpson looked around. "Where's Miss Weldon? Unh." He looked through the glass. "There she is, brushing him off again, while he lies there. Fixing his coat, buttoning it up. Here she comes back. Don't nobody fun with her, she resents it."

The barber clock said twelve o'clock and then one and then two and then three. Mr. Simpson kept track of it. "I make you a bet that Odd Martin lies over there 'till four o'clock," he said.

Someone else said, "I'll bet he's there until four-thirty."

"Last time—" a snickering of the shears "—he was there four hours. Nice warm day today. He may nap there until five. I'll say five. Let's see your money, gents or maybe later."

The money was collected and put on a shelf by the hair-ointments.

One of the younger men began shaving a stick with his pocketknife.

"It's sorta funny how we joke about Odd. We're scared of him, inside. I mean we won't let ourselves believe he's really dead. We don't dare believe it.

We'd never get over it if we knew. So we make him a joke. We let him lie around. He don't hurt nobody. He's just there. But I notice Doc Hudson has never really touched Odd's heart with his stethoscope. Scared of what he'd find, I bet."

"Scared of what he'd find!" Laughter. Simpson laughed and snished his shears. Two men with crusty beards laughed, a little too loud. The laughter didn't last long. "Great one for jokin', you are!" they all said, slapping their gaunt knees.

Miss Weldon, she went on manicuring her client.
"He's getting up!"

There was a general scramble to the plate glass window to watch Odd Martin gain his feet. "He's up on one knee, now up on the other, now someone's givin' him a hand."

"It's Miss Weldon. She sure got over there in a rush."

"What time is it?"

"Five o'clock. Pay me, boys!"

"That Miss Weldon's a queer nut herself. Takin' after a man like Odd." Simpson clicked his scissors. "Being an orphan, she's got quiet ways. She likes men who don't say much. Odd, he don't say hardly anything. Just the opposite of us crude men, eh, fellows?"

We talk too much. Miss Weldon don't like our way of talking."

"There they go, the two of 'em, Miss Weldon and Odd Martin."

"Say, take a little more off around my ears, will you, Simp?"

Skipping down the street, bouncing a red rubber ball, came little Charlie Bellows, his blond hair flopping in a yellow fringe over his blue eyes. He bounced the ball abstractedly, tongue between lips, and the ball fell under Odd Martin's feet where he sat once more on the tar barrel.

Inside the grocery, Miss Weldon was doing her supper shopping, putting soup cans and vegetable cans into a basket.

“Can I have my ball?” asked little Charlie Bellows upward at the six feet, two inches of Odd Martin. No one was within hearing distance.

“Can you have your ball?” said Odd Martin haltingly. He turned it over inside his head, it appeared. His level gray eyes shaped up Charlie like one would shape up a little ball of clay. “You can have your ball; yes, take it.”

Charlie bent slowly and took hold of the bright red rubber globe and arose slowly, a secretive look in his eyes. He looked north and south and then up at Odd’s bony pale brown face. “I know something.”

Odd Martin looked down. “You know something?”

Charlie leaned forward. “You’re dead.”

Odd Martin sat there.

“You’re really dead,” whispered little Charlie Bellows. “But I’m the only one who really knows. I believe you, Mr. Odd. I tried it once myself. Dying, I mean. It’s hard. It’s work. I laid on the floor for an hour. But I blinked and my stomach itched, so I scratched it. Then—I quit. Why?” He looked at his shoes. “Cause I had to go to the bathroom.”

A slow, understanding smile formed in the soft pallid flesh of Odd Martin’s long, bony face. “It is work. It isn’t easy.”

“Sometimes I think about you,” said Charlie. “I see you walking by my house at night. Sometimes at two in the morning. Sometimes at four. I wake up and I know you’re out walking around. I know I should look out, and I do, and, gee, there you are, walking and walking. Not going hardly any place.”

“There’s no place to go.” Odd sat with his large square, calloused hands on his knees. “I try thinking of some—place to—go—” He slowed, like a horse to a bit-pull. “—but it’s hard to think. I try and—try. Sometimes I almost know what to do, where to go. Then I forget. Once I had an idea to go to a doctor and have him declare me dead, but somehow—” his voice was slow and husky and low “—I never got there.”

Charlie looked straight at him. “If you want, I’ll take you.”

Odd Martin looked leisurely at the setting sun. “No. I’m weary-tired, but I’ll—wait. Now I’ve gone this far, I’m curious to see what happens next. After the flood that washed away my farm and all my stock and put me under water, like a chicken in a bucket, I filled up like you’d fill a Thermos with water, and I came walking out of the flood, anyhow.

But I knew I was dead. Late of nights I lay listening in my room, but there’s no heartbeat in my ears or in my chest or in my wrists, though I lie still as a cold cricket. Nothing inside me but a darkness and a relaxation and an understanding.

There must be a reason for me still walking, though. Maybe it was because I was still young when I died. Only twenty-eight, and not married yet. I always wanted to marry. Never got around to it.

Here I am, doing odd jobs around town, saving my money, ’cause I never eat, heck, I can’t eat, and sometimes getting so discouraged and downright bewildered that I lie down in the gutter and hope they’ll take me and poke me in a pine box and lay me away forever.

Yet at the same time—I don’t want that. I want a little more. I know that whenever Miss Weldon walks by and I see the wind playing her hair like a little brown feather—” He sighed away into silence.

Charlie Bellows waited politely a minute, then cleared his throat and darted away, bouncing his ball. “See you later!”

Odd stared at the spot where Charlie’d been. Five minutes later he blinked. “Eh? Somebody here? Somebody speak?”

Miss Weldon came out of the grocery with a basket full of food. “Would you like to walk me home, Odd?”

They walked along in an easy silence, she careful not to walk too fast, because he set his legs down carefully. The wind rustled in the cedars

and in the elms and the maples all along the way. Several times his lips parted and he glanced aside at her, and then he shut his mouth tight and stared ahead, as if looking at something a million miles away.

Finally, he said. "Miss Weldon?"

"Yes, Odd?"

"I been saving and saving up my money. I've got quite a handsome sum. I don't spend much for anything, and—you'd be surprised," he said, sincerely. "I got about a thousand dollars.

Maybe more. Some times I count it and get tired and I can't count no more. And—" he seemed baffled and a little angry with her suddenly. "Why do you like me, Miss Weldon?" he demanded.

She looked a little surprised, then smiled up at him. It was almost a child-like look of liking she gave him. "Because you're quiet. Because you're not loud and mean like the men at the barber shop. Because I'm lonely, and you've been kind. Because you're the first one that ever liked me. The others don't even look at me once.

They say I can't think. They say I'm a moron, because I didn't finish the sixth grade. But I'm so lonely, Odd, and talking to you means so much."

He held her small white hand, tight.

She moistened her lips. "I wish we could do something about the way people talk about you. I don't want to sound mean, but if you'd only stop telling them you're dead, Odd."

He stopped walking. "Then you don't believe me, either," he said remotely.

"You're 'dead' for want of a good woman's cooking, for loving, for living right, Odd. That's what you mean by 'dead'; nothing else!"

His gray eyes were deep and lost. "Is that what I mean?" He saw her eager, shiny face. "Yes, that's what I mean. You guessed it right. That's what I mean."

Their footsteps went along together, drifting in the wind, like leaves floating, and the night got darker and softer and the stars came out. Two boys and two girls stood under a street lamp about nine o'clock that evening. Far away down the street someone walked along slowly, quietly, alone.

"There he is," said one of the boys. "You ask him, Tom."

Tom scowled uneasily. The girls laughed at him. Tom said, "Oh, okay, but you come along."

The wind flung the trees right and left, shaking down leaves in singles and clusters that fell past Odd Martin's head as he approached.

"Mr. Odd? Hey there, Mr. Odd?"

"Eh? Oh, hello."

"We—uh—that is—" gulped Tom, looking around for assistance. "We want to know if—well—we want you to come to our party!"

A minute later, after looking at Tom's clean, soap-smelling face and seeing the pretty blue jacket his sixteen-year-old girl friend wore, Odd Martin answered. "Thank you. But I don't know. I might forget to come."

"No, you wouldn't," insisted Tom. "You'd remember this one, because it's Hallowe'en!"

One of the girls yanked Tom's arm and hissed. "Let's not, Tom. Let's not. Please. He won't do, Tom. He isn't scary enough."

Tom shook her off. "Let me handle this."

The girl pleaded. "Please, no. He's just a dirty old man. Bill can put candle tallow on his fingers and those horrible porcelain teeth in his mouth and the green chalk marks under his eyes, and scare the ducks out of us. We don't need him?" And she jerked her rebellious head at Odd.

Odd Martin stood there. He heard the wind in the high tree-tops for ten minutes before he knew that the four young people were gone.

A small dry laugh came up in his mouth like a pebble. Children. Hallowe'en. Not scary enough. Bill would do better. Just an old man. He tasted the laughter and found it both strange and bitter.

The next morning little Charlie Bellows flung his ball against the store front, retrieved it flung it again. He heard someone humming behind him, turned. "Oh, hello, Mr. Odd!"

Odd Martin was walking along, with green paper dollars in his fingers, counting it. He stopped, suddenly. His eyes were blank.

"Charlie," he cried out. "Charlie!" His hands groped.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Odd!"

"Charlie, where was I going? Where was I going? Going somewhere to buy something for Miss Weldon! Here, Charlie, help me!"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Odd." Charlie ran up and stood in his shadow.

A hand came down, money in it, seventy dollars of money. "Charlie, run buy a dress for—Miss Weldon—" His mind was grasping, clutching, seizing, wrestling in a web of forgetfulness. There was stark terror and longing and fear in his face. "I can't remember the place, oh God, help me remember. A dress and a coat, for Miss Weldon, at—at—"

"Krausmeyer's Department Store?" asked Charlie, helpfully.

"No!"

"Fieldman's?"

"No!"

"Mr. Leiberman's?"

"Leiberman! That's it! Leiberman, Leiberman! Here, here, Charlie, here, run down there to—"

"Leiberman's."

"—and get a new green dress for—Miss Weldon, and a coat. A new green dress with yellow roses painted on it. You get them and bring them to me here. Oh, Charlie, wait."

“Yes, sir, Mr. Odd?”

“Charlie—you think, maybe I could clean up at your house?” asked Odd quietly. “I need a—a bath.”

“Gee, I don’t know, Mr. Odd. My folks are funny. I don’t know.”

“That’s all right, Charlie. I understand. Run now!”

Charlie ran on the double, clutching the money. He ran by the barber shop. He poked his head in. Mr. Simpson stopped snipping on Mr. Trumbull’s hair and glared at him. “Hey!” cried Charlie. Odd Martin’s humming a tune!”

“What tune?” asked Mr. Simpson.

“It goes like this,” said Charlie, and hummed it.

“Yee Gods Amaughty!” bellowed Simpson. “So that’s why Miss Weldon ain’t here manicurin’ this morning! That there tune’s the Wedding March!”

Charlie ran on. Pandemonium!

Shouting, laughter, the sound of water squishing and pattering. The back of the barber shop steamed. They took turns. First, Mr. Simpson got a bucket of hot water and tossed it down in a flap over Odd Martin, who sat in the tub, saying nothing, just sitting there, and then Mr. Trumbull scrubbed Odd Martin’s pale back with a big brush and lots of cow-soap, and every once in a while Shorty Phillips doused Odd with a jigger of eau de cologne. They all laughed and ran around in the steam. “Gettin’ married, hunh, Odd?”

Congratulations, boy!” More water. “I always said that’s what you needed,” laughed Mr. Simpson, hitting Odd in the chest with a bunch of cold water this time. Odd Martin pretended not to even notice the shock. “You’ll smell better now!”

Odd sat there. “Thanks. Thanks so very much for doing this. Thanks for helping me. Thanks for giving me a bath this way. I needed it.” Simpson laughed behind his hand. “Sure thing, anything for you, Odd.”

Someone whispered in the steamy background, "Imagine her and him married? A moron married to an idiot!"

Simpson frowned. "Shut up back there!"

Charlie rushed in. "Here's the green dress, Mr. Odd!"

An hour later they had Odd in the barber chair. Someone had lent him a new pair of shoes. Mr. Trumbull was polishing them vigorously, winking at everybody. Mr. Simpson snipped Odd's hair for him, would not take money for it. "No, no, Odd, you keep that as a wedding present from me to you. Yes, sir." And he spat. Then he shook some rose-water all over Odd's dark hair. "There. Moonlight and roses!"

Martin looked around. "You won't tell nobody about this marriage," he asked, "until tomorrow? Me and Miss Weldon sort of want a marriage without the town poking fun. You understand?"

"Why sure, sure, Odd," said Simpson, finishing the job. "Mum's the word. Where you going to live? You buying a new farm?"

"Farm?" Odd Martin stepped down from the chair. Somebody lent him a nice new coat and someone else had pressed his pants for him. He looked fine. "Yes, I'm going to buy the property now.

Have to pay extra for it, but it's worth it. Extra. Come along now. Charlie Bellows." He went to the door. "I bought a house out on the edge of town. I have to go make the payment on it now. Come on, Charlie."

Simpson stopped him. "What's it like? You didn't have much money; you couldn't afford much."

"No," said Odd, "you're right. It's a small house. But it'll do. Some folks built it awhile back, then moved away East somewheres, it was up for sale for only five hundred, so I got it. Miss Weldon and I are moving out there tonight, after our marriage. But don't tell nobody, please, until tomorrow."

“Sure thing, Odd. Sure thing.”

Odd went away into the four o’clock light, Charlie at his side, and the men in the barber shop went and sat down, laughing. The wind sighed outside, and slowly the sun went down and the snipping of the shears went on, and the men sat around, laughing and talking . . .

The next morning at breakfast, little Charlie Bellows sat thoughtfully spooning his cereal. Father folded his newspaper across the table and looked at Mother. “Everybody in town’s talking about the quiet elopement of Odd Martin and Miss Weldon,” said Father. “People, looking for them, can’t find them.”

“Well,” said Mother, “I hear he bought a house for her.”

“I heard that, too,” said Father. “I phoned Carl Rogers this morning. He says he didn’t sell any house to Odd. And Carl is the only real estate dealer in town.”

Charlie Bellows swallowed some cereal. He looked at his father. “Oh, no, he’s not the only real estate dealer in town?”

“What do you mean?” demanded Father.

“Nothing, except that I looked out the window at midnight, and I saw something.”

“You saw what?”

“It was all moonlight. And you know what I saw? Well, I saw two people walking up the Elm Grade road. A man and a woman. A man in a new dark coat, and a woman in a green dress. Walking real slow. Holding hands.” Charlie took a breath. “And the two people were Mr. Odd Martin and Miss Weldon. And walking out the Elm Grade road there ain’t any houses out that way at all.

Only the Trinity Park Cemetery. And Mr. Gustavsson, in town, he sells tombs in the Trinity Park Cemetery. He’s got an office in town. Like I said, Mr. Carl Rogers ain’t the only real estate man in town. So—”

“Oh,” snorted Father, irritably, “you were dreaming!”

Charlie bent his head over his cereal and looked out from the corners of his eyes.

“Yes, sir,” he said finally, sighing. “I was only dreaming.”

The End