

The Gift, Ray Bradbury

The Gift

There was a tap at the door and Dwight William Alcott looked up from a display of photographs just sent on from some digs outside Karnak. He was feeling especially well fed, visually, or he would not have answered the tap. He nodded, which seemed signal enough, for the door opened immediately and a bald head moved in.

"I know this is curious," said his assistant, "but there is a child here ... "
"That is curious," said D. W. Alcott. "Children do not usually come here. He has no appointment?"
"No, but he insists that after you see the gift he has for you, you'll make an appointment, then."

"An unusual way to make appointments," mused Alcott. "Should I see this child? A boy, is it?"
"A brilliant boy, so he tells me, bearing an ancient treasure."
"That's too much for me!" The curator laughed. "Let him in."
"I already am." Timothy, half inside the door, scuttled forward with a great rattling of studs under his arm.

"Sit down," said D. W. Alcott.
"If you don't mind, I'll stand. She might want two chairs, sir, however."
"Two chairs?"
"If you don't mind, sir."
"Bring an extra chair, Smith."
"Yes, sir."

And two chairs were brought and Timothy lifted the long balsa-light gift and placed it on both chairs where the bundled stuffs shown in a good light.

"Now, young man"
"Timothy," supplied the boy.
"Timothy, I'm busy. State your business, please."

"Yes, sir."

"Well?"

"Four thousand four hundred years and nine hundred million deaths, sir ... "

"My God, that's quite a mouthful." D. W. Alcott waved at Smith.

"Another chair." The chair was brought. "Now you really must sit down, son." Timothy sat. "Say that again."

"I'd rather not, sir. It sounds like a lie."

"And yet," said D. W. Alcott, slowly, "why do I believe you?"

"I have that kind of face, sir."

The curator of the museum leaned forward to study the pale and intense face of the boy.

"By God," he murmured, "you do."

"And what have we here?" he went on, nodding to what appeared to be a catafalque. "You know the name papyrus?"

"Everyone knows that!"

"Boys, I suppose. Having to do with robbed tombs and Tut. Boys know papyrus."

"Yes, sir. Come look, if you want."

The curator wanted, for he was already on his feet.

He arrived to look down and probe as through a filing cabinet, leaf by leaf of cured tobacco, it almost seemed, with here and there the head of a lion or the body of a hawk. Then his fingers riffled faster and faster and he gasped as if struck in the chest.

"Child," he said and let out another breath. "Where did you find these?"

"This, not these, sir. And I didn't find it, it found me. Hide and seek in a way, it said. I heard. Then it wasn't hidden anymore."

"My God," gasped D. W. Alcott, using both hands now to open "wounds" of brittle stuff. "Does this belong to you?"

"It works both ways, sir. It owns me, I own it. We're family."

The curator glanced over at the boy's eyes. "Again," he said, "I do believe."

"Thank God."

"Why do you thank God?"

"Because if you didn't believe me, I'd have to leave." The boy edged away.

"No, no," cried the curator. "No need. But why do you speak as if this, it, owned you, as if you are related?"

"Because," said Timothy. "It's Nef, sir."

"Nef?"

Timothy reached over and folded back a tissue of bandage.

From deep under the openings of papyrus, the sewn-shut eyes of the old, old woman could be seen, with a hidden creek of vision between the lids. Dust filtered from her lips.

"Nef, sir," said the boy. "Mother of Nefertiti."

The curator wandered back to his chair and reached for a crystal decanter.

"Do you drink wine, boy?"

"Not until today, sir."

Timothy sat for a long moment, waiting, until Mr. D. W. Alcott handed him a small glass of wine. They drank together and at last Mr. D. W. Alcott said:

"Why have you brought this it her here?"

"It's the only safe place in the world."

The curator nodded. "True. Are you offering," he paused. "Nef? For sale?"

"No, sir."

"What do you want, then?"

"Just that if she stays here, sir, that once a day, you talk to her."

Embarrassed, Timothy looked at his shoes.

"Would you trust me to do that, Timothy?"

Timothy looked up. "Oh, yes, sir. If you promised."

Then he went on, raising his gaze to fix on the curator.

"More than that, listen to her."

"She talks, does she?"

"A lot, sir."

"Is she talking, now?"

"Yes, but you have to bend close. I'm used to it, now. After a while, you will be, too."

The curator shut his eyes and listened. There was a rustle of ancient paper, somewhere, which wrinkled his face, listening. "What?" he asked. "What is it she, mainly, says?"

"Everything there is to say about death, sir."

"Everything?"

"Four thousand four hundred years, like I said, sir. And nine hundred million people who had to die so we can live."

"That's a lot of dying."

"Yes, sir. But I'm glad."

"What a terrible thing to say!"

"No, sir. Because if they were alive, we wouldn't be able to move. Or breathe."

"I see what you mean. She knows all that, does she?"

"Yes, sir. Her daughter was the Beautiful One Who Was There. So she is the One Who Remembers."

"The ghost that tells a flesh and soul complete history of the Book of the Dead?"

"I think so, sir. And one other thing," added Timothy.

"And?"

"If you don't mind, anytime I want, a visitor's card."

"So you can come visit anytime?"

"After hours, even."

"I think that can be arranged, son. There will be papers to be signed, of course, and authentication carried out."

The boy nodded.

The man rose.

"Silly of me to ask. Is she still talking?"

"Yes, sir. Come close. No, closer."

The boy nudged the man's elbow, gently.

Far off, near the temple of Karnak, the desert winds sighed. Far off,
between the paws of a great lion, the dust settled.
"Listen," said Timothy.

The End