

# The Handler, Ray Bradbury

## The Handler

MR. Benedict Came Out Of His Little House. He stood on the porch, painfully shy of the sun and inferior to people. A little dog trotted by with clever eyes; so clever that Mr. Benedict could not meet its gaze. A small child peered through the wrought-iron gate around the graveyard, near the church, and Mr. Benedict winced at the pale, penetrant curiosity of the child.

“You’re the funeral man,” said the child.

Cringing within himself, Mr. Benedict did not speak.

“You own the church?” asked the child, finally.

“Yes,” said Mr. Benedict.

“And the funeral place?”

“Yes,” said Mr. Benedict bewilderedly.

“And the yards and the stones and the graves?” wondered the child.

“Yes,” said Benedict, with some show of pride. And it was true. An amazing thing it was. A stroke of business luck really, that had kept him busy and humming nights over long years. First he had landed the church and the churchyard, with a few green-mossed tombs, when the Baptist people moved uptown.

Then he had built himself a fine little mortuary, in Gothic style, of course, and covered it with ivy, and then added a small house for himself, way in back. It was very convenient to die for Mr. Benedict.

He handled you in and out of buildings with a minimum of confusion and a maximum of synthetic benediction. No need of a funeral procession! declared his large ads in the morning paper. Out of the church and into the earth, slick as a whistle. Nothing but the finest preservatives used!

The child continued to stare at him and he felt like a candle blown out in the wind. He was so inferior. Anything that lived or moved made him feel apologetic and melancholy.

He was continually agreeing with people, never daring to argue or shout or say no. Whoever you might be, if Mr. Benedict met you on the street he would look up your nostrils or perceive your ears or examine your hairline with his little shy, wild eyes and never look you straight in your eye, and he would hold your hand between his cold ones as if your hand was a precious gift, as he said to you:

“You are definitely, irrevocably, believably correct.”

But, always, when you talked to him, you felt he never heard a word you said.

Now, he stood on his porch and said, “You are a sweet little child,” to the little staring child, in fear that the child might not like him.

Mr. Benedict walked down the steps and out the gate, without once looking at his little mortuary building. He saved that pleasure for later. It was very important that things took the right precedence. It wouldn't pay to think with joy of the bodies awaiting his talents in the mortuary building. No, it was better to follow his usual day-after-day routine. He would let the conflict began.

He knew just where to go to get himself enraged. Half of the day he spent traveling from place to place in the little town, letting the superiority of the living neighbors overwhelm him, letting his own inferiority dissolve him, bathe him in perspiration, tie his heart and brain into trembling knots.

He spoke with Mr. Rodgers, the druggist, idle, senseless morning talk. And he saved and put away all the little slurs and intonations and insults that Mr. Rodgers sent his way. Mr. Rodgers always had some terrible thing to say about a man in the funeral profession.

“Ha, ha,” laughed Mr. Benedict at the latest joke upon himself, and he wanted to cry with miserable violence. “There you are, you cold one,” said Mr. Rodgers on this particular morning. “Cold one,” said Mr. Benedict, “ha, ha!”

Outside the drugstore, Mr. Benedict met up with Mr. Stuyvesant, the contractor. Mr. Stuyvesant looked at his watch to estimate just how much time he dared waste on Benedict before trumping up some appointment. “Oh, hello, Benedict,” shouted Stuyvesant. “How’s business? I bet you’re going at it tooth and nail. Did you get it? I said, I bet you’re going at it tooth and—”

“Yes, yes,” chuckled Mr. Benedict vaguely. “And how is your business, Mr. Stuyvesant?” “Say, how do your hands get so cold, Benny, old man? That’s a cold shake you got there. You just get done embalming a frigid woman! Hey, that’s not bad. You heard what I said?” roared Mr. Stuyvesant, pounding him on the back. “Good, good!” cried Mr. Benedict, with a fleshless smile. “Good day.”

On it went, person after person. Mr. Benedict, pummeled on from one to the next, was the lake into which all refuse was thrown. People began with little pebbles and then when Mr. Benedict did not ripple or protest, they heaved a stone, a brick, a boulder. There was no bottom to Mr. Benedict, no splash and no settling. The lake did not answer.

As the day passed he became more helpless and enraged with them, and he walked from building to building and had more little meetings and conversations and hated himself with a very real, masochistic pleasure.

But the thing that kept him going most of all was the thought of the night pleasures to come. So he inflicted himself again and again with these stupid, pompous bullies and bowed to them and held his hands like little biscuits before his stomach, and asked no more than to be sneered at.

“There you are, meat-chopper,” said Mr. Flinger, the delicatessen man. “How are all your corned beeves and pickled brains?”

Things worked to a crescendo of inferiority. With a final kettle-drumming of insult and terrible self-effacement, Mr. Benedict, seeking wildly the correct time from his wrist-watch, turned and ran back through the town. He was at his peak, he was all ready now, ready to work, ready to do what must be done, and enjoy himself. The awful part of the day was over, the good part was now to begin!

He ran eagerly up the steps to his mortuary.

The room waited like a fall of snow. There were white hummocks and pale delineations of things recumbent under sheets in the dimness. The door burst open.

Mr. Benedict, framed in a flow of light stood in the door, head back, one hand upraised in dramatic salute, the other hand upon the door-knob in unnatural rigidity.

He was the puppet-master come home.

He stood a long minute in the very center of his theater. In his head applause, perhaps, thundered. He did not move, but lowered his head in abject appreciation of this kind, applauding audience.

He carefully removed his coat, hung it up, got himself into a fresh white smock, buttoned the cuffs with professional crispness, then washed his hands together as he looked around at his very good friends.

It had been a fine week; there were any number of family relics lying under the sheets, and as Mr. Benedict stood before them he felt himself grow and grow and tower and stretch over them.

“Like Alice!” he cried to himself in surprise. “Taller, taller. Curiouser and curiouser!” He flexed his hands straight out and up.

He had never gotten over his initial incredulity when in the room with the dead. He was both delighted and bewildered to discover that here

he was master of peoples, here he might do what he wished with men, and they must, by necessity, be polite and cooperative with him.

They could not run away. And now, as on other days, he felt himself released and resilient, growing, growing like Alice. “Oh, so tall, oh, so tall, so very tall . . . until my head . . . bumps . . . the ceiling.”

He walked about among the sheeted people. He felt the same way he did when coming from a picture show late at night, very strong, very alert, very certain of himself. He felt that everyone was watching him as he left a picture show, and that he was very handsome and very correct and brave and all the things that the picture hero was, his voice oh, so resonant, persuasive and he had the right lilt to his left eyebrow and the right tap with his cane.

And sometimes this movie-induced hypnosis lasted all the way home and persisted into sleep. Those were the only two times in his living he felt miraculous and fine, at the picture show, or here—in his own little theater of the cold.

He walked along the sleeping rows, noting each name on its white card. “Mrs. Walters, Mr. Smith. Miss Brown. Mr. Andrews. Ah, good afternoon, one and all!”

“How are you today, Mrs. Shellmund?” he wanted to know, lifting a sheet as if looking for a child under a bed. “You’re looking splendid, dear lady.”

Mrs. Shellmund had never spoken to him in her life, she’d always gone by like a large, white statue with roller skates hidden under her skirts, which gave her an elegant, gliding, imperturbable rush.

“My dear Mrs. Shellmund,” he said, pulling up a chair and regarding her through a magnifying glass. “Do you realize, my lady, that you have a sebaceous condition of the pores? You were quite waxen in life. Pore trouble. Oil and grease and pimples.

A rich, rich diet, Mrs. Shellmund, there was your trouble. Too many frosties and spongie cakes and cream candies. You always prided yourself on your brain, Mrs. Shellmund, and thought I was like a dime under your toe, or a penny, really. But you kept that wonderful, priceless brain of yours afloat in parfaits and fizzes and limeades and sodas and were so very superior to me that now, Mrs. Shellmund, here is what shall happen. . . .”

He did a neat operation on her. Cutting the scalp in a circle, he lifted it off then lifted out the brain. Then he prepared a cake-confectioner’s little sugar-bellows and squirted her empty head full of little whipped cream and crystal ribbons, stars and frolops, in pink, white and green, and on top he printed in a fine pink scroll, “Sweet Dreams,” and put the skull back on and sewed it in place and hid the marks with wax and powder. “So there!” he said, finished.

He walked on to the next table.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Wren. Good afternoon. And how is the master of the racial hatreds today, Mr. Wren? Pure, white, laundered Mr. Wren. Clean as snow, white as linen, Mr. Wren, you are.

The man who hated Jews and Negroes. Minorities, Mr. Wren, minorities.” He pulled back the sheet. Mr. Wren stared up with glassy, cold eyes. “Mr. Wren, look upon a member of a minority. Myself. The minority of inferiors, those who speak not above a whisper, those afraid of talking aloud, those frightened little nonentities, mice.

Do you know what I am going to do with you, Mr. Wren? First, let us draw your blood from you, intolerant friend.” The blood was drawn off. “Now—the injection of, you might say, embalming fluid.”

Mr. Wren, snow-white, linen-pure, lay with the fluid going in him. Mr. Benedict laughed.

Mr. Wren turned black; black as dirt, black as night. The embalming fluid was—ink.

“And hello to you, Edmund Worth!” What a handsome body Worth had! Powerful, with muscles pinned from huge bone to huge bone, and a chest like a boulder. Women had grown speechless when he walked by, men had stared with envy and hoped they might borrow that body some night and ride home in it to the wife and give her a nice surprise. But Worth’s body had always been his own, and he had applied it to those tasks and pleasures which made him a conversational topic among all peoples who enjoyed sin.

“And now, here you are,” said Mr. Benedict, looking down at the fine body with pleasure. For a moment he was lost in memory of his own body in his own past.

He had once tried strangling himself with one of those apparati you nail in a doorway and chuck under your jawbone and pull yourself up on, hoping to add an inch to his ridiculously short frame. To counteract his deadly pale skin he had lain in the sun, but he boiled and his skin fell off in pink leaflets, leaving only more pink, moist, sensitive skin.

And what could he do about the eyes from which his mind peered?—those close-set, glassy little eyes and the tiny wounded mouth. You can repaint houses, burn trash, move from the slum, shoot your mother, buy new clothes, get a car, make money, change all those outer environmental for something new. But what’s the brain to do when caught like cheese in the throat of a mouse?

His own environment thus betrayed him; his own skin, body, color, voice gave him no chance to extend out into that vast, bright world where people tickled ladies’ chins and kissed their mouths and shook hands with friends and traded aromatic cigars.

Thinking in this fashion, Mr. Benedict stood over the magnificent body of Edmund Worth.

He severed Worth’s head, put it in a coffin on a small, satin pillow, facing up, then he placed one hundred and ninety pounds of bricks in

the coffin and arranged some pillows inside a black coat and a white shirt and tie to look like the upper body, and covered the whole with a blanket of blue velvet, up to the chin. It was a fine illusion.

The body itself he placed in a refrigerating vault.

“When I die, I shall leave specific orders, Mr. Worth, that my head be severed and buried, joined to your body. By that time I will have acquired an assistant willing to perform such a rascally act, for money. If one cannot have a body worthy of love in life, one can at least gain such a body in death. Thank you.”

He slammed the lid on Edmund Worth.

Since it was a growing and popular habit in the town for people to be buried with the coffin lids closed over them during the service, this gave Mr. Benedict great opportunities to vent his repressions on his hapless guests.

Some he locked in their boxes upside down, some face down, or making obscene gestures. He had the most utterly wondrous fun with a group of old maiden ladies who were mashed in an auto on their way to an afternoon tea.

They were famous gossips, always with heads together over some choice bit. What the onlookers at the triple funeral did not know (all three casket lids were shut) was that, as in life, all three were crowded into one casket, heads together in eternal, cold, petrified gossip.

The other two caskets were filled with pebbles and shells and ravel of gingham. It was a nice service. Everybody cried. “Those three inseparables, at last separated.” Everybody sobbed.

“Yes,” said Mr. Benedict, having to hide his face in his grief.

Not lacking for a sense of justice, Mr. Benedict buried one rich man stark naked. A poor man he buried wound in gold cloth, with five-dollar



gold pieces for buttons and twenty-dollar coins on each eyelid. A lawyer he did not bury at all, but burned him in the incinerator—his coffin contained nothing but a pole-cat, trapped in the woods one Sunday.

An old maid, at her service one afternoon, was the victim of a terrible device. Under the silken comforter, parts of an old man had been buried with her. There she lay, insulted by cold organs, being made cold love to by hidden hands, hidden and planted other things. The shock showed on her face, somewhat.

So Mr. Benedict moved from body to body in his mortuary that afternoon, talking to all the sheeted figures, telling them his every secret. The final body for the day was the body of one Merriwell Blythe, an ancient man afflicted with spells and comas.

Mr. Blythe had been brought in for dead several times, but each time had revived in time to prevent premature burial.

Mr. Benedict pulled back the sheet from Mr. Blythe's face.

Mr. Merriwell Blythe fluttered his eyes.

"Ah!" and Mr. Benedict let fall the sheet.

"You!" screamed the voice under the sheet.

Mr. Benedict fell against the slab, suddenly shaken and sick.

"Get me up from here!" cried the voice of Mr. Merriwell Blythe.

"You're alive!" said Mr. Benedict, jerking aside the sheet.

"Oh, the things I've heard, the things I've listened to the last hour!" wailed the old man on the slab, rolling his eyes about in his head in white orbits. "Lying here; not able to move, and hearing you talk the things you talk! Oh, you dark, dark thing, you awful thing, you fiend, you monster, get me up from here. I'll tell the mayor and the council and everyone; oh you dark, dark thing!

You defiler and sadist, you perverted scoundrel, you terrible man, wait'll I tell, I tell on you!" shrieked the old man, frothing. "Get me up

from here!" "No!" said Mr. Benedict, falling to his knees. "Oh, you terrible man!" sobbed Mr. Merriwell Blythe. "To think this has gone on in our town all these years and we never knew the things you did to people!

Oh, you monstrous monster!" "No," whispered Mr. Benedict, trying to get up, falling down, palsied and in terror. "The things you said," accused the old man in dry contempt. "The things you do!" "Sorry," whispered Mr. Benedict.

The old man tried to rise. "Don't!" said Mr. Benedict, and held onto him. "Let go of me!" said the old man. "No," said Mr. Benedict. He reached for a hypodermic and stabbed the old man in the arm with it.

"You!" cried the old man, wildly, to all the sheeted figures. "Help me!" He squinted blindly at the window, at the churchyard below with the leaning stones. "You, out there, too, under the stones, help! Listen!"

The old man fell back, whistling and frothing. He knew he was dying. "All, listen," he babbled. "He's done this to me, and you, and you, all of you, he's done too much too long. Don't take it! Don't, don't let him do anymore to anyone!" The old man licked away the stuff from his lips, growing weaker. "Do something to him!"

Mr. Benedict stood there, shocked, and said, "They can't do anything to me. They can't. I say they can't."

"Out of your graves!" wheezed the old man. "Help me! Tonight, or tomorrow, or soon, but jump up and fix him, oh, this horrible man!" And he wept many tears.

"How foolish," said Mr. Benedict numbly. "You're dying and foolish." Mr. Benedict could not move his lips. His eyes were wide. "Go on and die now, quickly."

"Everybody up!" shouted the old man. "Everybody out! Help!"

“Please don’t talk anymore,” said Mr. Benedict. “I really don’t like to listen.”

The room was suddenly very dark. It was night. It was getting late. The old man raved on and on, getting weaker. Finally, smiling, he said, “They’ve taken a lot from you, horrible man. Tonight, they’ll do something.”

The old man died.

People say there was an explosion that night in the graveyard. Or rather a series of explosions, a smell of strange things, a movement, a violence, a raving. There was much light and lightning, and a kind of rain, and the church bells hammered and slung about in the belfry, and stones toppled, and things swore oaths, and things flew through the air, and there was a chasing and a screaming, and many shadows and all the lights in the mortuary blazing on, and things moving inside and outside in swift jerks and shamblings, windows broke, doors were torn from hinges, leaves from trees, iron gates clattered, and in the end there was a picture of Mr. Benedict running about, vanishing, the lights out, suddenly, and a tortured scream that could only be from Mr. Benedict himself.

After that—nothing. Quiet.

The town people entered the mortuary the next morning. They searched the mortuary building and the church, and then they went out into the graveyard.

And they found nothing but blood, a vast quantity of blood, sprinkled and thrown and spread everywhere you could possibly look, as if the heavens had bled profusely in the night.

But not a sign of Mr. Benedict.

“Where could he be?” everybody wondered.

“How should we know?” everybody replied, confounded.

And then they had the answer.

Walking through the graveyard they stood in deep tree shadows where the stones, row on row, were old and time-erased and leaning. No birds sang in the trees. The sunlight which finally managed to pierce the thick leaves, was like a light-bulb illumination, weak, frail, unbelievable, theatrical, thin.

They stopped by one tombstone. "Here, now!" they exclaimed. Others paused and bent over the grayish, moss-flecked stone, and cried out.

Freshly scratched, as if by feebly, frantic, hasty fingers (in fact, as if scratched by fingernails the writing was that new) was the name:  
"MR. BENEDICT"

"Look over here!" someone else cried. Everybody turned. "This one, this stone, and this one, and this one, too!" cried the villager, pointing to five other gravestones.  
Everybody hurried around, looking and recoiling.

Upon each and every stone, scratched by fingernail scratchings, the same message appeared:  
"MR. BENEDICT"  
The town people were stunned.

"But that's impossible," objected one of them, faintly. "He couldn't be buried under all these gravestones!"

They stood there for one long moment. Instinctively they all looked at one another nervously in the silence and the tree darkness. They all waited for an answer. With fumbling, senseless lips, one of them replied, simply:  
"Couldn't he?"

The End