The Kilimanjaro Device, Ray Bradbury

The Kilimanjaro Device

I arrived in the truck very early in the morning. I had been driving all night, for I hadn't been able to sleep at the motel so I thought I might as well drive and I arrived among the mountains and hills near Ketchum and Sun Valley just as the sun came up and I was glad I had kept busy with driving.

I drove into the town itself without looking up at that one hill. I was afraid if I looked at it, I would make a mistake. It was very important not to look at the grave. At least that is how I felt. And I had to go on my hunch.

I parked the truck in front of an old saloon and walked around the town and talked to a few people and breathed the air and it was sweet and clear. I found a young hunter, but he was wrong; I knew that after talking to him for a few minutes. I found a very old man, but he was no better. Then I found me a hunter about fifty, and he was just right. He knew, or sensed, everything I was looking for.

I bought him a beer and we talked about a lot of things, and then I bought him another beer and led the conversation around to what I was doing here and why I wanted to talk to him. We were silent for a while and I waited, not showing my impatience, for the hunter, on his own, to bring up the past, to speak of other days three years ago, and of driving toward Sun Valley at this time or that and what he saw and knew about a man who had once sat in this bar and drunk beer and talked about hunting or gone hunting out beyond.

And at last, looking off at the wall as if it were the highway and the mountains, the hunter gathered up his quiet voice and was ready to speak.
"That old man," he said. "Oh, that old man on the road. Oh, that poor old man."

I waited.
“I just can’t get over that old man on the road,” he said, looking down now into his drink.
I drank some more of my beer, not feeling well, feeling very old myself and tired.

When the silence prolonged itself, I got out a local map and laid it on the wooden table. The bar was quiet. It was midmorning and we were completely alone there.
“This is where you saw him most often?” I asked.

The hunter touched the map three times. “I used to see him walking here. And along there. Then he’d cut across the land here. That poor old man. I wanted to tell him to keep off the road.

I didn’t want to hurt or insult him. You don’t tell a man like that about roads or that maybe he’ll be hit. If he’s going to be hit, well that’s it. You figure it’s his business, and you go on. Oh, but he was old there at the last.”

“He was,” I said, and folded the map and put it in my pocket.
“You another of those reporters?” said the hunter.
“Not quite those,” I said.

“Didn’t mean to lump you in with them,” he said.
“No apology needed,” I said. “Let’s just say I was one of his readers.”

“Oh, he had readers all right, all kinds of readers. Even me. I don’t touch books from one autumn to the next. But I touched his. I think I liked the Michigan stories best. About the fishing.

I think the stories about the fishing are good. I don’t think anybody ever wrote about fishing that way and maybe won’t ever again. Of course, the bullfight stuff is good, too. But that’s a little far off. Some of the cowpokes like them; they been around the animals all their life.

A bull here or a bull there, I guess it's the same. I know one cowpoke has read just the bull stuff in the Spanish stories of the old man's forty times. He could go over there and fight, I swear."

"I think all of us felt," I said, "at least once in our lives, when we were young, we could go over there, after reading the bull stuff in the Spanish stories, that we could go over there and fight. Or at least jog ahead of the running of the bulls, in the early morning, with a good drink waiting at the other end of the run, and your best girl with you there for the long weekend."

I stopped. I laughed quietly. For my voice had, without knowing, fallen into the rhythm of his way of saying, either out of his mouth, or from his hand. I shook my head and was silent.
"You been up to the grave yet?" asked the hunter, as if he knew I would answer yes.

"No," I said.
That really surprised him. He tried not to show it.
"They all go up to the grave," he said.
"Not this one."
He explored around in his mind for a polite way of asking. "I mean . . ." he said. "Why not?"

"Because it's the wrong grave," I said.
"All graves are wrong graves when you come down to it," he said.

"No," I said. "There are right graves and wrong ones, just as there are good times to die and bad times."
He nodded at this. I had come back to something he knew, or at least smelled was right.

"Sure, I knew men," he said, "died just perfect. You always felt, yes, that was good. One man I knew, sitting at the table waiting for supper, his wife in the kitchen, when she came in with a big bowl of soup there he was sitting dead and neat at the table.

Bad for her, but, I mean, wasn't that a good way for him? No sickness. No nothing but sitting there waiting for supper to come and never knowing if it came or not.

Like another friend. Had an old dog. Fourteen years old. Dog was going blind and tired. Decided at last to take the dog to the pound and have him put to sleep. Loaded the old blind tired dog on the front seat of his car. The dog licked his hand, once.

The man felt awful. He drove toward the pound. On the way there, with not one sound, the dog passed away, died on the front seat, as if he knew and, knowing, picked the better way, just handed over his ghost, and there you are. That's what you're talking about, right?"

I nodded.
"So you think that grave up on the hill is a wrong grave for a right man, do you?"
"That's about it," I said.

"You think there are all kinds of graves along the road for all of us?"
"Could be," I said.

"And if we could see all our life one way or another, we'd choose better? At the end, looking back," said the hunter, "we'd say, hell, that was the year and the place, not the other year and the other place, but that one year, that one place. Would we say that?"

"Since we have to choose or be pushed finally," I said, "yes."

"That's a nice idea," said the hunter. "But how many of us have that much sense? Most of us don't have brains enough to leave a party when the gin runs out. We hang around."
"We hang around," I said, "and what a shame."
We ordered some more beer.

The hunter drank half the glass and wiped his mouth.
"So what can you do about wrong graves?" he said.

“Treat them as if they didn’t exist,” I said. “And maybe they’ll go away, like a bad dream.”
The hunter laughed once, a kind of forlorn cry. “God, you’re crazy. But I like listening to crazy people. Blow some more.”

“That’s all,” I said.
“Are you the Resurrection and the Life?” said the hunter.
“No.”
“You going to say Lazarus come forth?”

“No.”
“What then?”
“I just want, very late in the day,” I said, “to choose right places, right times, right graves.”
“Drink that drink,” said the hunter. “You need it. Who in hell sent you?”

“Me,” I said. “I did. And some friends. We all chipped in and picked one out of ten. We bought that truck out on the street and I drove it across country. On the way I did a lot of hunting and fishing to put myself in the right frame.

I was in Cuba last year. Spain the summer before. Africa the summer before that. I got a lot to think about. That’s why they picked me.”
“To do what, to do what, goddammit?” said the hunter urgently, half wildly, shaking his head. “You can’t do anything. It’s all over.”

“Most of it,” I said. “Come on.”
I walked to the door. The hunter sat there. At last, examining the fires lit in my face by my talking, he grunted, got up, walked over, and came outside with me.
I pointed at the curb. We looked together at the truck parked there.

“I’ve seen those before,” he said. “A truck like that, in a movie. Don’t they hunt rhino from a truck like that? And lions and things like that? Or at least travel in them around Africa?”
“You remember right.”

“No lions around here,” he said. “No rhino, no water buffalo, nothing.”
“No?” I asked.

He didn’t answer that.
I walked over and touched the open truck.
“You know what this is?”
“I’m playing dumb from here on,” said the hunter. “What is it?”

I stroked the fender for a long moment.
“A Time Machine,” I said.

His eyes widened and then narrowed and he sipped the beer he was carrying in one large hand. He nodded me on.
“A Time Machine,” I repeated.
“I heard you,” he said.

He walked out around the safari truck and stood in the street looking at it. He wouldn’t look at me. He circled the truck one entire round and stood back on the curb and looked at the cap on the gas tank.
“What kind of mileage you get?” he said.
“I don’t know yet.”

“You don’t know anything,” he said.
“This is the first trip,” I said. “I won’t know until it’s over.”
“What do you fuel a thing like that with?” he said.
I was silent.

“What kind of stuff you put in?” he asked.
I could have said: Reading late at night, reading many nights over the years until almost morning, reading up in the mountains in the snow or reading at noon in Pamplona, or reading by the streams or out in a boat somewhere along the Florida coast. Or I could have said: All of us put our hands on this Machine, all of us thought about it and bought it and touched it and put our love in it and our remembering what his words did to us twenty years or twenty-five or thirty years ago.

There's a lot of life and remembering and love put by here, and that's the gas and the fuel and the stuff or whatever you want to call it; the rain in Paris, the sun in Madrid, the snow in the high Alps, the smoke off the guns in the Tyrol, the shine of light off the Gulf Stream, the explosion of bombs or explosions of leaped fish, that's the gas and the fuel and the stuff here; I should have said that, I thought it, but I let it stay unsaid.

The hunter must have smelled my thought, for his eyes squinted up and, telepath that he was from long years in the forest, chewed over my thinking.
Then he walked over and did an unexpected thing. He reached out and . . . touched . . . my Machine.

He laid his hand on it and left it there, as if feeling for the life, and approving what he sensed beneath his hand. He stood that way for a long time.
Then he turned without a word, not looking at me, and went back into the bar and sat drinking alone, his back turned toward the door.
I didn't want to break the silence. It seemed a good time to go, to try.

I got in the truck and started the motor.
What kind of mileage? What kind of fuel? I thought. And drove away.
I kept on the road and didn't look right or left and I drove for what must have been an hour, first this direction and then that, part of the time my eyes shut for full seconds, taking a chance I might go off and get hurt or killed.
And then, just before noon, with the clouds over the sun, suddenly I knew it was all right.

I looked up at the hill and I almost yelled.
The grave was gone.

I drove down into a little hollow just then and on the road ahead, wandering along by himself, was an old man in a heavy sweater.

I idled the safari truck along until I was pacing him as he walked. I saw he was wearing steel-rimmed glasses and for a long moment we moved together, each ignoring the other until I called his name.

He hesitated, and then walked on.
I caught up with him in the truck and said again, “Papa.”
He stopped and waited.

I braked the car and sat there in the front seat.
“Papa,” I said.
He came over and stood near the door.

“Do I know you?”
“No. But I know you.”
He looked me in the eyes and studied my face and mouth. “Yes. I think you do.”
“I saw you on the road. I think I’m going your way. Want a lift?”
“It’s good walking this time of day,” he said. “Thanks.”

“Let me tell you where I’m going,” I said.
He had started off but now stopped and, without looking at me, said, “Where?”

“A long way,” I said.
“It sounds long, the way you tell it. Can’t you make it shorter?”
“No. A long way,” I said. “About two thousand six hundred days, give or take some days, and half an afternoon.”
He came back and looked into the car.

“Is that how far you’re going?”
“That’s how far.”
“In which direction? Ahead?”
“Don’t you want to go ahead?”
He looked at the sky. “I don’t know. I’m not sure.”

“It’s not ahead,” I said. “It’s back.”

His eyes took on a different color. It was a subtle shift, a flex, like a man stepping out from the shade of a tree into sunlight on a cloudy day.
“Back.”
“Somewhere between two thousand and three thousand days, split half a day, give or take an hour, borrow or loan a minute, haggle over a second,” I said.
“You really talk,” he said.

“Compulsive,” I said.
“You’d make a lousy writer,” he said. “I never knew a writer yet was a good talker.”
“That’s my albatross,” I said.
“Back?” He weighed the word.
“I’m turning the car around,” I said. “And I’m going back down the road.”

“Not miles but days?”
“Not miles but days.”
“Is it that kind of car?”
“That’s how it’s built.”
“You’re an inventor then?”
“A reader who happens to invent.”
“If the car works, that’s some car you got there.”

“At your service,” I said.
“And when you get where you’re going,” said the old man, putting his hand on the door and leaning and then, seeing what he had done, taking his hand away and standing taller to speak to me, “where will you be?”

“January 10, 1954.”
“That’s quite a date,” he said.
“It is, it was. It can be more of a date.”
Without moving, his eyes took another step out into fuller light.
“And where will you be on that day?”
“Africa,” I said.
He was silent. His mouth did not work. His eyes did not shift.

“Not far from Nairobi,” I said.
He nodded, once, slowly.
“Africa, not far from Nairobi.”
I waited.
“And when we get there, if we go?” he said.

“I leave you there.”
“And then?”
“You stay there.”
“And then?”
“That’s all.”
“That’s all?”
“Forever,” I said.
The old man breathed out and in, and ran his hand over the edge of the doorsill.

“This car,” he said, “somewhere along the way does it turn into a plane?”
“I don’t know,” I said.
“Somewhere along the way do you turn into my pilot?”
“It could be. I’ve never done this before.”
“But you’re willing to try?”
I nodded.
“Why?” he said, and leaned in and stared me directly in the face with a terrible, quietly wild intensity. “Why?”

Old man, I thought, I can’t tell you why. Don’t ask me.
He withdrew, sensing he had gone too far.
“I didn’t say that,” he said.
“You didn’t say it,” I said.
“And when you bring the plane in for a forced landing,” he said, “will you land a little differently this time?”

“Different, yes.”
“A little harder?”
“I’ll see what can be done.”

“And will I be thrown out but the rest of you okay?”

“The odds are in favor.”
He looked up at the hill where there was no grave. I looked at the same hill. And maybe he guessed the digging of it there.
He gazed back down the road at the mountains and the sea that could not be seen beyond the mountains and a continent beyond the sea.
“That’s a good day you’re talking about.”
“The best.”

“And a good hour and a good second.”
“Really, nothing better.”
“Worth thinking about.”
His hand lay on the doorsill, not leaning, but testing, feeling, touching, tremulous, undecided. But his eyes came full into the light of African noon.

“Yes.”
“Yes?” I said.
“I think,” he said, “I’ll grab a lift with you.”
I waited one heartbeat, then reached over and opened the door.
Silently he got in the front seat and sat there and quietly shut the door without slamming it. He sat there, very old and very tired. I waited.
“Start her up,” he said.

I started the engine and gentled it.
“Turn her around,” he said.
I turned the car so it was going back on the road.

“Is this really,” he said, “that kind of car?”
“Really, that kind of car.”
He looked out at the land and the mountains and the distant house.
I waited, idling the motor.
“When we get there,” he said, “will you remember something . . .?”
“I’ll try.”
“There’s a mountain,” he said, and stopped and sat there, his mouth quiet, and he didn’t go on.

But I went on for him. There is a mountain in Africa named Kilimanjaro, I thought. And on the western slope of that mountain was once found the dried and frozen carcass of a leopard. No one has ever explained what the leopard was seeking at that altitude.

We will put you up on that same slope, I thought, on Kilimanjaro, near the leopard, and write your name and under it say nobody knew what he was doing here so high, but here he is. And write the date born and died, and go away down toward the hot summer grass and let mainly dark warriors and white hunters and swift okapis know the grave.

The old man shaded his eyes, looking at the road winding away over the hills. He nodded.

“Let’s go,” he said.
“Yes, Papa,” I said.
And we motored away, myself at the wheel, going slow, and the old man beside me, and as we went down the first hill and topped the next, the sun came out full and the wind smelled of fire. We ran like a lion in the long grass. Rivers and streams flashed by.

I wished we might stop for one hour and wade and fish and lie by the stream frying the fish and talking or not talking. But if we stopped we might never go on again. I gunned the engine. It made a great fierce wondrous animal’s roar. The old man grinned.

“It’s going to be a great day!” he shouted.
“A great day.”

Back on the road, I thought, How must it be now, and now, us disappearing? And now, us gone? And now, the road empty. Sun Valley quiet in the sun. What must it be, having us gone?
I had the car up to ninety.
We both yelled like boys.
After that I didn’t know anything.

“By God,” said the old man, toward the end. “You know? I think we’re . . .flying?”

The End