



The Man in the Rorschach Shirt, Ray Bradbury

The Man in the Rorschach Shirt

Brokaw.

What a name!

Listen to it bark, growl, yip, hear the bold proclamation of:
Immanuel Brokaw!

A fine name for the greatest psychiatrist who ever tread the waters of existence without capsizing.

Toss a pepper-ground Freud casebook in the air and all students sneezed:
Brokaw!

What ever happened to him?

One day, like a high-class vaudeville act, he vanished.

With the spotlight out, his miracles seemed in danger of reversal. Psychotic rabbits threatened to leap back into hats. Smokes were sucked back into loud-powder gun muzzles. We all waited. Silence for ten years. And more silence.

Brokaw was lost, as if he had thrown himself with shouts of laughter into mid-Atlantic. For what? To plumb for Moby-Dick? To psychoanalyze that colorless fiend and see what he really had against Mad Ahab?
Who knows?

I last saw him running for a twilight plane, his wife and six Pomeranian dogs yapping far behind him on the dusky field.

“Good-bye forever!”

His happy cry seemed a joke. But I found men flaking his gold-leaf name from his office door next day, as his great fat-women couches were hustled out into the raw weather toward some Third Avenue auction.

So the giant who had been Gandhi-Moses-Christ-Buddha-Freud all layered in one incredible Armenian dessert had dropped through a hole in the clouds. To die? To live in secret?
Ten years later I rode on a California bus along the lovely shores of Newport.

The bus stopped. A man in his seventies bounced on, jingling silver into the coin box like manna. I glanced up from the rear of the bus and gasped.

“Brokaw! By the saints!”

And with or without sanctification, there he stood. Reared up like God manifest, bearded, benevolent, pontifical, erudite, merry, accepting, forgiving, messianic, tutorial, forever and eternal . . .
Immanuel Brokaw.

But not in a dark suit, no.

Instead, as if they were vestments of some proud new church, he wore: Bermuda shorts. Black leather Mexican sandals. A Los Angeles Dodgers’ baseball cap. French sunglasses. And . . .

The shirt! Ah God! The shirt!

A wild thing, all lush creeper and live flytrap undergrowth, all Pop-Op dilation and contraction, full flowered and crammed at every interstice and crosshatch with mythological beasts and symbols!

Open at the neck, this vast shirt hung wind-whipped like a thousand flags from a parade of united but neurotic nations.

But now, Dr. Brokaw tilted his baseball cap, lifted his French sunglasses to survey the empty bus seats. Striding slowly down the aisle, he wheeled, he paused, he lingered, now here, now there. He whispered, he murmured, now to this man, this woman, that child.

I was about to cry out when I heard him say:

“Well, what do you make of it?”

A small boy, stunned by the circus-poster effect of the old man’s attire, blinked, in need of nudging. The old man nudged:

“My shirt, boy! What do you see!?”

“Horses!” the child blurted, at last. “Dancing horses!”

“Bravo!” The doctor beamed, patted him, and strode on. “And you, sir?”

A young man, quite taken with the forthrightness of this invader from some summer world, said:

“Why . . . clouds, of course.”

“Cumulus or nimbus?”

“Er . . . not storm clouds, no, no. Fleecy, sheep clouds.”

“Well done!”

The psychiatrist plunged on.

“Mademoiselle?”

“Surfers!” A teen-age girl stared. “They’re the waves, big ones. Surfboards. Super!”

And so it went, on down the length of the bus and as the great man progressed a few scraps and titters of laughter sprang up, then, grown infectious, turned to roars of hilarity. By now, a dozen passengers had heard the first responses and so fell in with the game. This woman saw skyscrapers! The doctor scowled at her suspiciously. The doctor winked. That man saw crossword puzzles. The doctor shook his hand.

This child found zebras all optical illusion on an African wild. The doctor slapped the animals and made them jump! This old woman saw vague Adams and misty Eves being driven from half-seen Gardens. The doctor scooched in on the seat with her awhile; they talked in fierce whispered elations, then up he jumped and forged on. Had the old woman seen an eviction? This young one saw the couple invited back in!

Dogs, lightnings, cats, cars, mushroom clouds, man-eating tiger lilies!

Each person, each response, brought greater outcries. We found ourselves all laughing together. This fine old man was a happening of

nature, a caprice, God's rambunctious Will, sewing all our separateness up in one.

Elephants! Elevators! Alarums! Dooms!

When first he had bounded aboard we had wanted naught of each other. But now like an immense snowfall which we must gossip on or an electrical failure that blacked out two million homes and so thrown us all together in communal chat, laugh, guffaw, we felt the tears clean up our souls even as they cleaned down our cheeks.

Each answer seemed funnier than the previous, and no one shouted louder his great torments of laughter than this grand tall and marvelous physician who asked for, got, and cured us of our hairballs on the spot. Whales. Kelp. Grass meadows. Lost cities. Beauteous women. He paused. He wheeled. He sat. He rose. He flapped his wildly colored shirt, until at last he towered before me and said:

"Sir, what do you find?"

"Why, Dr. Brokaw, of course!"

The old man's laughter stopped as if he were shot. He seized his dark glasses off, then clapped them on and grabbed my shoulders as if to wrench me into focus.

"Simon Wincelaus, is that you?"

"Me, me!" I laughed. "Good grief, doctor, I thought you were dead and buried years ago. What's this you're up to?"

"Up to?" He squeezed and shook my hands and pummeled my arms and cheeks gently. Then he snorted a great self-forgiving laugh as he gazed down along the acreage of ridiculous shirting. "Up to? Retired. Swiftly gone. Overnight traveled three thousand miles from where last you saw me . . ." His peppermint breath warmed my face. "And now best known hereabouts as . . . listen! . . . the Man in the Rorschach Shirt."

"In the what?" I cried.

“Rorschach Shirt.”

Light as a carnival gas balloon he touched into the seat beside me.
I sat stunned and silent.

We rode along by the blue sea under a bright summer sky.
The doctor gazed ahead as if reading my thoughts in vast skywriting
among the clouds.

“Why, you ask, why? I see your face, startled, at the airport years ago.
My Going Away Forever day. My plane should have been named the
Happy Titanic. On it I sank forever into the traceless sky. Yet here I am
in the absolute flesh, yes? Not drunk, nor mad, nor riven by age and
retirement’s boredom. Where, what, why, how come?”

“Yes,” I said, “why did you retire, with everything pitched for you? Skill,
reputation, money. Not a breath of—”

“Scandal? None! Why, then? Because, this old camel had not one but
two humps broken by two straws. Two amazing straws. Hump Number
One—”

He paused. He cast me a sidelong glance from under his dark glasses.
“This is a confessional,” I said. “Mum’s the word.”

“Confessional. Yes. Thanks.”

The bus hummed softly on the road.
His voice rose and fell with the hum.

“You know my photographic memory? Blessed, cursed, with total
recall. Anything said, seen, done, touched, heard, can be snapped back
to focus by me, forty, fifty, sixty years later. All, all of it, trapped in
here.”

He stroked his temples lightly with the fingers of both hands.

“Hundreds of psychiatric cases, delivered through my door, day after
day, year on year. And never once did I check my notes on any of those
sessions. I found, early on, I need only play back what I had heard inside

my head. Sound tapes, of course, were kept as a double-check, but never listened to. There you have the stage set for the whole shocking business.

“One day in my sixtieth year a woman patient spoke a single word. I asked her to repeat it. Why? Suddenly I had felt my semicircular canals shift as if some valves had opened upon cool fresh air at a subterranean level.

“‘Best,’ she said.

“‘I thought you said, ‘beast,’” I said.

“‘Oh, no, doctor, ‘best.’”

“One word. One pebble dropped off the edge. And then—the avalanche. For, distinctly, I had heard her claim: ‘He loved the beast in me,’ which is one kettle of sexual fish, eh? When in reality she had said, ‘He loved the best in me,’ which is quite another pan of cold cod, you must agree.

“That night I could not sleep. I smoked, I stared from windows. My head, my ears, felt strangely clear, as if I had just gotten over a thirty years’ cold. I suspected myself, my past, my senses, so at three in the deadfall morning I motored to my office and found the worst:

“The recalled conversations of hundreds of cases in my mind were not the same as those recorded on my tapes or typed out in my secretary’s notes!”

“You mean . . .?”

“I mean when I heard beast it was truly best. Dumb was really numb. Ox were cocks and vice-versa. I heard bed and someone had said head. Sleep was creep. Lay was day. Paws were really pause. Rump was merely jump. Fiend was only leaned. Sex was hex or mix or, God knows, perplex!

Yes-mess. No-slow. Binge-hinge. Wrong-long. Side-hide. Name a name, I’d heard it wrong. Ten million dozen misheard nouns! I panicked through my files! Good Grief! Great Jumping Josie!

“All those years, those people! Holy Moses, Brokaw, I cried, all these years down from the Mount, the word of God like a flea in your ear. And now, late in the day, old wise one, you think to consult your lightning-scribbled stones. And find your Laws, your Tables, different!

“Moses fled his offices that night. I ran in dark, unraveling my despair. I trained to Far Rockaway, perhaps because of its lamenting name.

“I walked by a tumult of waves only equaled by the tumult in my breast. How? I cried, how can you have been half-deaf for a lifetime and not known it! And known it only now when through some fluke, the sense, the gift, returned, how, how?!

“My only answer was a great stroke of thunder wave upon the sands. “So much for straw number one that broke Hump Number One of this odd-shaped human camel.”

There was a moment of silence.

We rode swaying on the bus. The bus moved along the golden shore road, through a gentle breeze.

“Straw number two?” I asked, quietly, at last.

Dr. Brokaw held his French sunglasses up so sunlight struck fish-glitters all about the cavern of the bus. We watched the swimming rainbow patterns, he with detachment and at last half-amused concern.

“Sight. Vision. Texture. Detail. Aren’t they miraculous. Aweful in the sense of meaning true awe? What is sight, vision, insight? Do we really want to see the world?”

“Oh, yes,” I cried, promptly.

“A young man’s unthinking answer. No, my dear boy, we do not. At twenty, yes, we think we wish to see, know, be all. So thought I once. But I have had weak eyes most of my life, spent half my days being fitted out with new specs by oculists, hee?

Well, comes the dawn of the corneal lens! At last, I decided, I will fit myself with those bright little teardrop miracles, those invisible discs! Coincidence? Psychosomatic cause and effect? For, that same week I got my contact lenses was the week my hearing cleared up! There must be some physio-mental connection, but don't hazard me into an informed guess.

"All I know is I had my little crystal corneal lenses ground and installed upon my weak baby blue eyes and—voilà!

"There was the world!

"THERE were people!

"And there, God save us, was the dirt, and the multitudinous pores upon the people.

"Simon," he added, grieving gently, eyes shut for a moment behind his dark glasses, "have you ever thought, did you know, that people are for the most part pores?"

He let that sink in. I thought about it.

"Pores?" I said, at last.

"Pores! But who thinks of it? Who bothers to go look? But with my restored vision I saw! A thousand, a million, ten billion . . . pores. Large, small, pale, crimson . . . pores. Everyone and on everyone. People passing. People crowding buses, theaters, telephone booths, all pore and little substance. Small pores on tiny women.

Big pores on monster men. Or vice versa. Pores as numerous as that foul dust which slides pell-mell down church-nave sunbeams late afternoons.

Pores. They became my utter and riven fascination. I stared at fine ladies' complexions, not their eyes, mouths, or earlobes. Shouldn't a man watch a woman's skeleton hinge and unhinge itself within that sweet pincushion flesh? Yes! But no, I saw only cheese-grater, kitchen-sieve skins. All Beauty turned sour Grotesque. Swiveling my gaze was like swiveling the 200-inch Palomar telescope in my damned skull.

Everywhere I looked I saw the meteor-bombarded moon, in dread super closeup!

“Myself? God, shaving mornings was exquisite torture. I could not pluck my eyes from my lost battle-pitted face. Damnation, Immanuel Brokaw, I sougled, you are the Grand Canyon at high noon, an orange with a billion navels, a pomegranate with the skin stripped off.

“In sum, my contact lenses had made me fifteen years old again. That is: festering, self-crucified bundle of doubt, horror, and absolute imperfection. The worst age in all one’s life had returned to haunt me with its pimped, bumpy ghost.

“I lay, a sleepless wreck. Ah, second Adolescence, take pity, I cried. How could I have been so blind, so many years? Blind, yes, and knew it, and always said it was of no importance. So I groped about the world as lustful myope, nearsightedly missing the holes, rips, tears, and bumps on others as well as myself. Now, Reality had run me down in the street. And the Reality was: Pores.

“I shut my eyes and went to bed for several days. Then I sat up in bed and proclaimed, wide-eyed: Reality is not all! I refuse this knowledge. I legislate against Pores! I accept instead those truths we intuit, or make up to live by.

“I traded in my eyeballs.

“That is I handed my corneal-contact lenses to a sadist nephew who thrives on garbages and lumpy people and hairy things.

“I clapped back on my old undercorrected specs. I strolled through a world of returned and gentle mists. I saw enough but not too much. I found half-discerned ghost peoples I could love again. I saw the ‘me’ in the morning glass I could once more bed with, admire and take as chum. I began to laugh each day with new happiness. Softly. Then, very loud.

“What a joke, Simon, life is.

“From vanity we buy lenses that see all and so lose everything!
“And by giving up some small bit-piece of so-called wisdom, reality, truth, we gain back an entirety of life! Who does not know this? Writers do! Intuited novels are far more ‘true’ than all your scribbled data-fact reportage in the history of the world!

“But then at last I had to face the great twin fractures lying athwart my conscience. My eyes. My ears. Holy Cow, I said, softly. The thousand folk who tread my offices and creaked my couches and looked for echoes in my Delphic Cave, why, why, preposterous! I had seen none of them, nor heard any clear!

“Who was that Miss Harbottle?

“What of old Dinsmuir?

“What was the real color, look, size of Miss Grimes?

“Did Mrs. Scrapwight really resemble and speak like an Egyptian papyrus mummy fallen out of a rug at my desk?

“I could not even guess. Two thousand days of fogs surrounded my lost children, mere voices calling, fading, gone.

“My God, I had wandered the marketplace with an invisible sign BLIND AND DEAF and people had rushed to fill my beggar’s cup with coins and rush off cured. Cured! Isn’t that miraculous, strange? Cured by an old ricket with one arm gone, as ’twere, and one leg missing. What? What did I say right to them out of hearing wrong? Who indeed were those people?

I will never know.

“And then I thought: there are a hundred psychiatrists about town who see and hear more clearly than I. But whose patients walk naked into high seas or leap off playground slides at midnight or truss women up and smoke cigars over them.

“So I had to face the irreducible fact of a successful career.

“The lame do not lead the lame, my reason cried, the blind and halt do not cure the halt and the blind! But a voice from the far balcony of my

soul replied with immense irony: Bee'swax and Bull-Durham! You, Immanuel Brokaw, are a porcelain genius, which means cracked but brilliant! Your occluded eyes see, your corked ears hear. Your fractured sensibilities cure at some level below consciousness! Bravo!

"But no, I could not live with my perfect imperfections. I could not understand nor tolerate this smug secret thing which, through screens and obfuscations, played meadow doctor to the world and cured field beasts.

"I had several choices then. Put my corneal lenses back in? Buy ear radios to help my rapidly improving sense of sound? And then? Find I had lost touch with my best and hidden mind which had grown comfortably accustomed to thirty years of bad vision and lousy hearing? Chaos for both curer and cured.

"Stay blind and deaf and work? It seemed a dreadful fraud, though my record was laundry-fresh, pressed white and clean.

"So I retired.

"Packed my bags and ran off into golden oblivion to let the incredible wax collect in my most terrible strange ears . . ."

We rode in the bus along the shore in the warm afternoon. A few clouds moved over the sun. Shadows misted on the sands and the people strewn on the sands under the colored umbrellas.

I cleared my throat.

"Will you ever return to practice again, doctor?"

"I practice now."

"But you just said—"

"Oh, not officially, and not with an office or fees, no, never that again."

The doctor laughed quietly. "I am sore beset by the mystery anyway. That is, of how I cured all those people with a laying on of hands even though my arms were chopped off at the elbows. Still, now, I do keep my 'hand' in."

“How?”

“This shirt of mine. You saw. You heard.”

“Coming down the aisle?”

“Exactly. The colors. The patterns. One thing to that man, another to the girl, a third to the boy. Zebras, goats, lightnings, Egyptian amulets. What, what, what? I ask. And: answer, answer, answer. The Man in the Rorschach Shirt.

“I have a dozen such shirts at home.

“All colors, all different pattern mixes. One was designed for me by Jackson Pollack before he died. I wear each shirt for a day, or a week, if the going, the answers, are thick, fast, full of excitement and reward. Then off with the old and on with the new. Ten billion glances, ten billion startled responds!

“Might I not market these Rorschach shirts to your psychoanalyst on vacation? Test your friends? Shock your neighbors? Titillate your wife? No, no. This is my own special private most dear fun. No one must share it. Me and my shirts, the sun, the bus, and a thousand afternoons ahead. The beach waits. And on it, my people!

“So I walk the shores of this summer world. There is no winter here, amazing, yes, no winter of discontent it would almost seem, and death a rumor beyond the dunes. I walk along in my own time and way and come on people and let the wind flap my great sailcloth shirt now veering north, south or south-by-west and watch their eyes pop, glide, leer, squint, wonder.

And when a certain person says a certain word about my ink-slashed cotton colors I give pause.

I chat. I walk with them awhile. We peer into the great glass of the sea. I sidewise peer into their soul. Sometimes we stroll for hours, a longish session with the weather. Usually it takes but that one day and, not knowing with whom they walked, scot-free, they are discharged all unwitting patients.

They walk on down the dusky shore toward a fairer brighter eve.
Behind their backs, the deaf-blind man waves them bon voyage and
trots home there to devour happy suppers, brisk with fine work done.

“Or sometimes I meet some half-slumberer on the sand whose troubles
cannot all be fetched out to die in the raw light of one day. Then, as by
accident, we collide a week later and walk by the tidal churn doing
what has always been done; we have our traveling confessional. For
long before pent-up priests and whispers and repentances, friends
walked, talked, listened, and in the listening-talk cured each other’s
sour despairs. Good friends trade hairballs all the time, give gifts of
mutual dismays and so are rid of them.

“Trash collects on lawns and in minds. With bright shirt and nail-tipped
trash stick I set out each dawn to . . . clean up the beaches. So many,
oh, so many bodies lying out there in the light. So many minds lost in
the dark. I try to walk among them all, without . . . stumbling . . .”

The wind blew in the bus window cool and fresh, making a sea of
ripples through the thoughtful old man’s patterned shirt.
The bus stopped.

Dr. Brokaw suddenly saw where he was and leaped up. “Wait!”
Everyone on the bus turned as if to watch the exit of a star performer.
Everyone smiled.

Dr. Brokaw pumped my hand and ran. At the far front end of the bus he
turned, amazed at his own forgetfulness, lifted his dark glasses and
squinted at me with his weak baby-blue eyes.
“You—” he said.

Already, to him, I was a mist, a pointillist dream somewhere out beyond
the rim of vision.

“You . . .” he called into that fabulous cloud of existence which
surrounded and pressed him warm and close, “you never told me.
What? What?!”

He stood tall to display that incredible Rorschach shirt which fluttered and swarmed with everchanging line and color.
I looked. I blinked. I answered.

“A sunrise!” I cried.
The doctor reeled with this gentle friendly blow.

“Are you sure it isn’t a sunset?” he called, cupping one hand to his ear.
I looked again and smiled. I hoped he saw my smile a thousand miles away within the bus.
“No,” I said. “A sunrise. A beautiful sunrise.”

He shut his eyes to digest the words. His great hands wandered along the shore of his wind-gentled shirt. He nodded. Then he opened his pale eyes, waved once, and stepped out into the world.

The bus drove on. I looked back once.
And there went Dr. Brokaw advancing straight out and across a beach where lay a random sampling of the world, a thousand bathers in the warm light.

He seemed to tread lightly upon a water of people.
The last I saw of him, he was still gloriously afloat.

The End