The Murder, Ray Bradbury

The Murder

‘There are some people who would never commit a murder,’ said Mr Bentley.
‘Who, for instance?’ said Mr Hill.

‘Me, for instance, and lots more like me,’ said Mr Bentley.
‘Poppycock!’ said Mr Hill.
‘Poppycock?’

‘You heard what I said. Everybody’s capable of murder. Even you.’
‘I haven’t a motive in the world, I’m content with things, my wife is a good woman, I’ve got enough money, a good job, why should I commit murder?’ said Mr Bentley.
‘I could make you commit murder,’ said Mr Hill.

‘You couldnot.’
‘I could.’ Mr Hill looked out over the small green summer town, meditatively.
‘You can’t make a murderer out of a nonmurderer.’

‘Yes, I could.’
‘No, you couldn’t!’
‘How much would you like to bet?’
‘I’ve never bet in my life. Don’t believe in it.’

‘Oh, hell, a gentleman’s bet,’ said Mr Hill. ‘A dollar. A dollar to a dime. Come on, now, you’d bet a dime, wouldn’t you? You’d be three kinds of Scotchman not to, and showing little faith in your thesis, besides. Isn’t it worth a dime to prove you’re not a murderer?’

‘You’re joking.’

‘We’re both joking and we’re both not. All I’m interested in proving is that you’re no different than any other man. You’ve got a button to be pushed. If I could find it and push it, you’d commit murder.’

Mr Bentley laughed easily and cut the end from a cigar, twirled it between his comfortably fleshy lips, and leaned back in his rocker. Then he fumbled in his unbuttoned vest pocket, found a dime, and laid it on the porch newel in front of him.

‘All right,’ he said, and, thinking, drew forth another dime. ‘There’s twenty cents says I’m not a murderer. Now how are you going to prove that I am?’ He chuckled and squeezed his eyes deliciously shut. ‘I’m going to be sitting around here a good many years.’

‘There’ll be a time limit, of course.’
‘Oh,willthere?’ Bentley laughed still louder.
‘Yes. One month from today, you’ll be a murderer.’

‘One month from today, eh? Ho!’ And he laughed, because the idea was so patently ridiculous. Recovering enough, he put his tongue in his cheek. ‘Today’s August first, right? So on September first, you owe me a dollar.’

‘No, you’ll owe me two dimes.’
‘You’re stubborn, aren’t you?’
‘You don’t know how stubborn.’

It was a fine late-summer evening, with just the right breeze, a lack of mosquitoes, two cigars burning the right way, and the sound of Mr Bentley’s wife clashing the dinner plates into soapsuds in the distant kitchen. Along the streets of the small town, people were coming out onto their porches, nodding at one another.

‘This is one of the most foolish conversations I’ve ever held in my life,’ said Mr Bentley, sniffing the air with glad appreciation, noting the smell of fresh-cut grass. ‘We talk about murder for ten minutes, we get off

into whether all of us are capable of murder, and, next thing you know, we've made a bet.'

'Yes,' said Mr Hill.

Mr Bentley looked over at his boarder. Mr Hill was about fifty-five, though he looked a bit older, with cold blue eyes, and a gray face, and lines that made it look like an apricot that has been allowed to shrivel in the sun.

He was neatly bald, like a Caesar, and had an intense way of talking, gripping the chair, gripping your arm, gripping his own hands together as if in prayer, always convincing himself or convincing you of the truth of his exclamations.

They had had many good talks in the past three months, since Mr Hill had moved into the back bedroom. They had talked of myriad things: locusts in spring, snow in April, seasonal tempests and coolings, trips to far places, the usual talk, scented with tobacco, comfortable as a full dinner, and there was a feeling in Mr Bentley that he had grown up with this stranger, known him from his days as a yelling child through bumpy adolescence to whitening senility.

This, come to think of it, was the first time they had ever disagreed on anything. The wonderful thing about their friendship had been that it had so far excluded any quibblings or side issues, and had walked the straight way of Truth, or what the two men thought was truth, or perhaps, thought Mr Bentley now, with the cigar in his hand, what he had thought was the truth and what Mr Hill, out of politeness or plan, had pretended to take for the truth also.

'Easiest money I ever made,' said Mr Bentley.

'Wait and see. Carry those dimes with you. You may need them soon.'

Mr Bentley put the coins into his vest pocket, half soberly. Perhaps a turn in the wind had, for a moment, changed the temperature of his thoughts. For a moment, his mind said, Well, could you murder? Eh?

‘Shake on it,’ said Mr Hill.
Mr Hill’s cold hand gripped tightly.
‘It’s a bet.’
‘All right, you fat slob, good night,’ said Mr Hill, and got up.

‘What?’ cried Mr Bentley, startled, not insulted yet, but because he couldn’t believe that terrible use of words.

‘Good night, slob,’ said Mr Hill, looking at him calmly. His hands were busy, moving aside the buttons on his summer shirt. The flesh of his lean stomach was revealed. There was an old scar there. It looked as if a bullet had gone cleanly through.

‘You see,’ said Mr Hill, seeing the wide popping eyes of the plump man in the rocking chair, ‘I’ve made this bet before.’
The front door shut softly. Mr Hill was gone.

The light was burning in Mr Hill’s room at ten minutes after one. Sitting there in the dark, Mr Bentley at last, unable to find sleep, got up and moved softly into the hall and looked at Mr Hill. For the door was open and there was Mr Hill standing before a mirror, touching, tapping, pinching himself, now here, now there.

And he seemed to be thinking to himself, Look at me! Look, here, Bentley, andhere!
Bentley looked.

There were three round scars on Hill’s chest and stomach. There was a long slash scar over his heart, and a little one on his neck. And on his back, as if a dragon had pulled its talons across in a furious raveling, a series of terrible furrows.

Mr Bentley stood with his tongue between his lips, his hands open.

‘Come in,’ said Mr Hill.
Bentley did not move.
‘You’re up late.’

‘Just looking at myself. Vanity, vanity.’
‘Those scars, all those scars.’
‘There are a few, aren’t there?’

‘So many. My God, I’ve never seen scars like that. How did you get them?’
Hill went on preening and feeling and caressing himself, stripped to the waist. ‘Well, now maybe you can guess.’ He winked and smiled friendlily.
‘How did you get them?!’
‘You’ll wake your wife.’
‘Tell me!’

‘Use your imagination, man.’
He exhaled and inhaled and exhaled again.
‘What can I do for you, Mr Bentley?’
‘I’ve come—’
‘Speak up.’

‘I want you to move out.’
‘Oh now, Bentley.’
‘We need this room.’
‘Really?’

‘My wife’s mother is coming to visit.’
‘That’s a lie.’
Bentley nodded. ‘Yes. I’m lying.’
‘Why don’t you say it? You want me to leave, period.’
‘Right.’

‘Because you’re afraid of me.’
‘No, I’m not afraid.’
‘Well, what if I told you I wouldn’t leave?’

‘No, you couldn’t do that.’
‘Well, I could, and I am.’
‘No, no.’

‘What are we having for breakfast, ham and eggs again?’ He craned his neck to examine that little scar there.
‘Please say you’ll go,’ asked Mr Bentley.
‘No,’ said Mr Hill.
‘Please.’

‘There’s no use begging. You make yourself look silly.’
‘Well, then, if you stay here, let’s call off the bet.’
‘Why call it off?’
‘Because.’
‘Afraid of yourself?’
‘No, I’m not!’

‘Shh.’ He pointed to the wall. ‘Your wife.’
‘Let’s call off the bet. Here. Here’s my money. You win!’ He groped frantically into his pocket and drew forth the two dimes. He threw them on the dresser, crashing. ‘Take them! You win! I could commit murder, I could, I admit it.’

Mr Hill waited a moment, and without looking at the coins, put his fingers down on the dresser, groped, found them, picked them up, clinked them, held them out. ‘Here.’
‘I don’t want them back!’ Bentley retreated to the doorway.
‘Take them.’
‘You win!’
‘A bet is a bet. This proves nothing.’

He turned and came to Bentley and dropped them in Bentley’s shirt pocket and patted them. Bentley took two steps back into the hall. ‘I do not make bets idly,’ Hill said.
Bentley stared at those terrible scars. ‘How many other people have you made this bet with!’ he cried. ‘How many?!’
Hill laughed. ‘Ham and eggs, eh?’

‘How many?! How many?!’
‘See you at breakfast,’ said Mr Hill.

He shut the door. Mr Bentley stood looking at it. He could see the scars through the door, as if by some translucency of the eye and mind. The razor scars. The knife scars. They hung in the paneling, like knots in old wood.
The light went out behind the door.

He stood over the body and he heard the house waking up, rushing, the feet down the stairs, the shouts, the half screams and stirrings. In a moment, people would be flooding around him. In a moment, there’d be a siren and a flashing red light, the car doors slamming, the snap of manacles to the fleshy wrists, the questions, the peering into his white, bewildered face.

But now he only stood over the body, fumbling. The gun had fallen into the deep, good-smelling night grass. The air was still charged with electricity but the storm was passing, and he was beginning to notice things again.

And there was his right hand, all by itself, fumbling about like a blind mole, digging, digging senselessly at his shirt pocket until it found what it wanted. And he felt his gross weight bend, stoop, almost fall, as he almost rushed down over the body. His blind hand went out and closed the up-staring eyes of Mr Hill, and on each wrinkled, cooling eyelid put a shiny new dime.

The door slammed behind him. Hattie screamed.

He turned to her with a sick smile. ‘I just lost a bet,’ he heard himself say.

The End