



The Night, Ray Bradbury

The Night

YOU are a child in a small town. You are, to be exact, eight years old, and it is growing late at night. Late, for you, accustomed to bedding in at nine or nine-thirty; once in a while perhaps begging Mom or Dad to let you stay up later to hear Sam and Henry on that strange radio that is popular in this year of 1927. But most of the time you are in bed and snug at this time of night.

It is a warm summer evening. You live in a small house on a small street in the outer part of town where there are few street lights. There is only one store open, about a block away; Mrs.

Singer's. In the hot evening Mother has been ironing the Monday wash and you have been intermittently begging for ice-cream and staring into the dark.

You and your mother are all alone at home in the warm darkness of summer. Finally, just before it is time for Mrs. Singer to close her store, Mother relents and tells you:

'Run get a pint of ice-cream and be sure she packs it tight.'

You ask if you can get a scoop of chocolate ice-cream on top, because you don't like vanilla, and mother agrees. You clutch the money and run barefooted over the warm evening cement pavement, under the apple trees and oak trees, towards the store. The town is so quiet and far off, you can only hear the crickets sounding in the spaces beyond the hot indigo trees that hold back the stars.

Your bare feet slap the pavement, you cross the street and find Mrs. Singer moving ponderously about her store, singing Yiddish melodies.

'Pint ice-cream?' she says. 'Chocolate on top? Yes!'

You watch her fumble the metal top off the ice-cream freezer and manipulate the scoop, packing the cardboard pint chock full with

'chocolate on top, yes!' You give the money, receive the chill, icy pack, and rubbing it across your brow and cheek, laughing, you thump barefootedly homeward. Behind you, the lights of the lonely little store blink out and there is only a street light shimmering on the corner, and the whole city seems to be going to sleep. . .

Opening the screen door you find Mom still ironing. She looks hot and irritated, but she smiles just the same.

'When will Dad be home from lodge-meeting?' you ask.

'About eleven-thirty or twelve,' Mother replies. She takes the ice-cream to the kitchen, divides it. Giving you your special portion of chocolate, she dishes out some for herself and the rest is put away, 'For Skipper and your father when they come.'

Skipper is your brother. He is your older brother. He's twelve and healthy, red-faced, hawk-nosed, tawny-haired, broad-shouldered for his years, and always running. He is allowed to stay up later than you.

Not much later, but enough to make him feel it is worth while having been born first. He is over on the other side of town this evening to a game of kick-the-can and will be home soon. He and the kids have been yelling, kicking, running for hours, having fun.

Soon he will come clomping in, smelling of sweat and green grass on his knees where he fell, and smelling very much in all ways like Skipper; which is natural.

You sit enjoying the ice-cream. You are at the core of the deep quiet summer night. Your mother and yourself and the night all around this small house on this small street. You lick each spoon of ice-cream thoroughly before digging for another, and Mom puts her ironing-board away and the hot iron in its case, and she sits in the armchair by the phonograph, eating her dessert and saying, 'My lands, it was a hot day today. It's still hot. Earth soaks up all the heat and lets it out at night. It'll be soggy sleeping.'

You both sit there listening to the summer silence. The dark is pressed down by every window and door, there is no sound because the radio needs a new battery, and you have played all the Knickerbocker Quartet records and Al Jolson and Two Black Crows records to exhaustion; so you just sit on the hardwood floor by the door and look out into the dark dark dark, pressing your nose against the screen until the flesh of its tip is moulded into small dark squares.

'I wonder where your brother is?' Mother says after a while. Her spoon scrapes on the dish. 'He should be home by now. It's almost nine-thirty.'

'He'll be here,' you say, knowing very well that he will be.

You follow Mom out to wash the dishes. Each sound, each rattle of spoon or dish is amplified in the baked evening. Silently, you go to the living-room, remove the couch cushions and, together, yank it open and extend it down into the double bed that it secretly is. Mother makes the bed, punching pillows neatly to flump them up for your head. Then, as you are unbuttoning your shirt, she says:

'Wait a while, Doug.'

'Why?'

'Because. I say so.'

'You look funny, Mom.'

Mom sits down a moment, then stands up, goes to the door, and calls. You listen to her calling and calling Skipper, Skipper, Skiiiiiiiperrrrrr over and over. Her calling goes out into the summer-warm dark and never comes back. The echoes pay no attention.

Skipper.

Skipper!

And as you sit on the floor a coldness that is not ice-cream and not winter, and not part of summer's heat, goes through you. You notice Mom's eyes sliding, blinking; the way she stands undecided and is nervous. All of these things.

She opens the screen door. Stepping out into the night she walks down the steps and down the front sidewalk under the lilac bush. You listen to her moving feet.

She calls again. Silence.

She calls twice more. You sit in the room. Any moment now Skipper will reply, from down the long, long narrow street:

'All right, Mom! All right, Mother! Hey!'

But he doesn't answer. And for two minutes you sit looking at the made-up bed, the silent radio, the silent phonograph, at the chandelier with its crystal bobbins gleaming quietly, at the rug with the scarlet and purple curlicues on it. You stub your toe on the bed purposely to see if it hurts. It does.

Whining, the screen door opens, and Mother says,

'Come on, Shorts. We'll take a walk.'

'Where to?'

'Just down the block. Come on. Better put your shoes on, though. You'll catch cold.'

'No, I won't. I'll be all right.'

You take her hand. Together you walk down St. James street. You smell lilacs in blossom; fallen apples lying crushed and odorous in the deep grass. Underfoot, the concrete is still warm, and the crickets are sounding louder against the darkening dark. You reach a corner, turn, and walk towards the ravine.

Off somewhere, a car goes by, flashing its lights in the distance. There is such a complete lack of life, light and activity. Here and there, back off from where you are walking towards the ravine you see faint squares of light where people are still up.

But most of the houses, darkened, are sleeping already, and there are a few lightless places where the occupants of a dwelling sit talking low

dark talk on their front porches. You hear a porch swing squeaking as you walk near.

'I wish your father was home,' says Mother. Her large hand tightens around your small one. 'Just wait'll I get that boy. I'll spank him within an inch of his life.'

A razor strop hangs in the kitchen for this. You think of it, remember when Dad has doubled and flourished it with muscled control over your frantic limbs. You doubt Mother will carry out her promise.

Now you have walked another block and are standing by the holy black silhouette of the German Baptist Church at the Corner of Chapel Street and Glen Rock. In back of the church a hundred yards away, the ravine begins. You can smell it.

It has a dark sewer, rotten foliage, thick green odour. It is a wide ravine that cuts and twists across the town, a jungle by day, a place to let alone at night, Mother has often declared.

You should feel encouraged by the nearness of the German Baptist Church, but you are not — because the building is not illumined, is cold and useless as a pile of ruins on the ravine edge. You are only eight years old, you know little of death, fear, or dread.

Death is the waxen effigy in the coffin when you were six and Grandfather passed away — looking like a great fallen vulture in his casket, silent, withdrawn, no more to tell you how to be a good boy, no more to comment succinctly on politics.

Death is your little sister one morning when you awaken at the age of seven, look into her crib and see her staring up at you with a blind blue, fixed and frozen stare until the men came with a small wicker basket to take her away. Death is when you stand by her high-chair four weeks later and suddenly realize she'll never be in it again, laughing and crying and making you jealous of her because she was born. That is death.

But this is more than death. This summer night wading deep in time and stars and warm eternity. It is an essence of all the things you will ever feel or see or hear in your life again, being brought steadily home to you all at once.

Leaving the pavement, you walk along a trodden, pebbled, weed-fringed path to the ravine's edge. Crickets, in loud full drumming chorus now, are shouting to quiver the dead. You follow obediently behind brave, fine, tall Mother who is defender of all the universe.

You feel braveness because she goes before, and you hang back a trifle for a moment, and then hurry on, too. Together, then, you approach, reach and pause at the very edge of civilization.

The ravine.

Here and now, down there in that pit of jungled blackness is suddenly all the evil you will ever know. Evil you will never understand. All of the nameless things are there. Later, when you have grown you'll be given names to label them with. Meaningless syllables to describe the waiting nothingness.

Down there in the huddled shadow, among thick trees and trailed vines, lives the odour of decay. Here, at this spot, civilization ceases, reason ends, and a universal evil takes over.

You realize you are alone. You and your mother. Her hand trembles. Her handtrembles.

Your belief in your private world is shattered. You feel Mother tremble. Why? Is she, too, doubtful? But she is bigger, stronger, more intelligent than yourself, isn't she? Does she, too, feel that intangible menace, that groping out of darkness, that crouching malignancy down below?

Is there, then, no strength in growing up? no solace in being an adult? no sanctuary in life? no flesh citadel strong enough to withstand the scabbling assault of midnights? Doubts flush you. Ice-cream lives again

in your throat, stomach, spine and limbs; you are instantly cold as a wind out of December-gone.

You realize that all men are like this. That each person is to himself one alone. One oneness, a unit in a society, but always afraid. Like here, standing. If you should scream now, if you should holler for help, would it matter?

You are so close to the ravine now that in the instant of your scream, in the interval between someone hearing it and running to find you, much could happen.

Blackness could come swiftly, swallowing; and in one titanically freezing moment all would be concluded. Long before dawn, long before police with flashlights might probe the disturbed pathway, long before men with trembling brains could rustle down the pebbles to your help.

Even if they were within five hundred yards of you now, and help certainly is, in three seconds a dark tide could rise to take all eight years of life away from you and —

The essential impact of life's loneliness crushes your beginning-to-tremble body. Mother is alone, too. She cannot look to the sanctity of marriage, the protection of her family's love, she cannot look to the United States Constitution or the City Police, she cannot look anywhere, in this very instant, save into her heart, and there she'll find nothing but uncontrollable repugnance and a will to fear. In this instant it is an individual problem seeking an individual solution. You must accept being alone and work on from there.

You swallow hard, cling to her. Oh, Lord, don't let her die, please, you think. Don't do anything to us. Father will be coming home from lodge-meeting in an hour and if the house is empty. . .?

Mother advances down the path into the primeval jungle. Your voice trembles. 'Mom. Skip's all right. Skip's all right. He's all right. Skip's all right.'

Mother's voice is strained high. 'He always comes through here. I tell him not to, but those darned kids, they come through here anyway. Some night he'll come through and never come out again — '

Never come out again. That could mean anything. Tramps. Criminals. Darkness. Accident. Most of all — death. Alone in the universe.

There are a million small towns like this all over the world. Each as dark, as lonely, each as removed, as full of shuddering and wonder. The reedy playing of minor-key violins is the small towns' music, with no lights but many shadows.

Oh the vast swelling loneliness of them. The secret damp ravines of them. Life is a horror lived in them at night, when at all sides sanity, marriage, children, happiness, is threatened by an ogre called Death.

Mother raises her voice into the dark.
'Skip! Skipper!' she calls. 'Skip! Skipper!'

Suddenly, both of you realize there is something wrong. Something very wrong. You listen intently and realize what it is. The crickets have stopped chirping.
Silence is complete.

Never in your life a silence like this one. One so utterly complete. Why should the crickets cease? Why? What reason? They have never stopped ever before. Not ever.

Unless. Unless —
Something is going to happen.

It is as if the whole ravine is tensing, bunching together its black fibres, drawing in power from all about sleeping countrysides, for miles and miles. From dew-sodden forest and dells and rolling hills where dogs tilt heads to moons, from all around the great silence is sucked into one centre, and you at the core of it. In ten seconds now, something will

happen, something will happen. The crickets keep their truce, the stars are so low you can almost brush the tinsel. There are swarms of them, hot and sharp.

Growing, growing, the silence. Growing, growing the tenseness. Oh it's so dark, so far away from everything. Oh God!
And then, way way off across the ravine:
'Okay Mom! Coming, Mother!'

And again:
'Hi, Mom! Coming, Mom!'

And then the quick scuttering of tennis shoes padding down through the pit of the ravine as three kids come dashing, giggling. Your brother Skipper, Chuck Redman and Augie Bartz. Running, giggling.

The stars suck up like the stung antennae of ten million snails.
The crickets sing!

The darkness pulls back, startled, shocked, angry. Pulls back, losing its appetite at being so rudely interrupted as it prepared to feed. As the dark retreats like a wave on a shore, three kids pile out of it, laughing.
'Hi, Mom! Hi, Shorts! Hey!'

It smells like Skipper all right. Sweat and grass and his oiled leather baseball glove.
'Young man, you're going to get a licking,' declares Mother. She puts away her fear instantly. You know she will never tell anybody of it, ever. It will be in her heart though, for all time, as it is in your heart, for all time.

You walk home to bed in the late summer night. You are glad Skipper is alive. Very glad. For a moment there you thought —

Far off in the dim moonlit country, over a viaduct and down a valley, a train goes rushing along and it whistles like a lost metal thing, nameless and running. You go to bed, shivering, beside your brother, listening to

that train whistle, and thinking of a cousin who lived way out in the country where that train is now; a cousin who died of pneumonia late at night years and years ago. . .

You smell the sweat of Skip beside you. It is magic. You stop trembling. You hear footsteps outside the house on the sidewalk, as Mother is turning out the lights. A man clears his throat in a way you recognize.

Mom says, 'That's your father.'

It is.

The End