

# The Other Foot, Ray Bradbury

## The Other Foot

WHEN they heard the news they came out of the restaurants and cafés and hotels and looked at the sky. They lifted their dark hands over their upturned white eyes. Their mouths hung wide.

In the hot noon for thousands of miles there were little towns where the dark people stood with their shadows under them, looking up.

In her kitchen Hattie Johnson covered the boiling soup, wiped her thin fingers on a cloth, and walked carefully to the back porch.

“Come on, Ma! Hey, Ma, come on—you’ll miss it!”

“Hey, Mom!”

Three little Negro boys danced around in the dusty yard, yelling. Now and then they looked at the house frantically.

“I’m coming,” said Hattie, and opened the screen door. “Where you hear this rumor?”

“Up at Jones’s, Ma. They say a rocket’s coming, first one in twenty years, with a white man in it!”

“What’s a white man? I never seen one.

“You’ll find out,” said Hattie. “Yes indeed, you’ll find out.”

“Tell us about one, Ma. Tell like you did.”

Hattie frowned. “Well, it’s been a long time. I was a little girl, you see. That was back in 1965.”

“Tell us about a white man, Mom!”

She came and stood in the yard, looking up at the blue clear Martian sky with the thin white Martian clouds, and in the distance the Martian

hills broiling in the heat. She said at last, "Well, first of all, they got white hands."

"White hands!" The boys joked, slapping each other.

"And they got white arms.

"White arms!" hooted the boys.

"And white faces."

"White faces! Really?"

"White like this, Mom?" The smallest threw dust on his face, sneezing.

"This way?"

"Whiter than that" she said gravely, and turned to the sky again. There was a troubled thing in her eyes, as if she was looking for a thundershower up high, and not seeing it made her worry. "Maybe you better go inside."

"Oh, Mom!" They stared at her in disbelief. "We got to watch, we just got to. Nothing's going to happen, is it?"

"I don't know. I got a feeling, is all."

"We just want to see the ship and maybe run down to the port and see that white man. What's he like, huh, Mom?"

"I don't know. I just don't know," she mused, shaking her head.

"Tell us some more!"

"Well, the white people live on Earth, which is where we all come from, twenty years ago. We just up and walked away and came to Mars and set down and built towns and here we are. Now we're Martians instead of Earth people. And no white men've come up here in all that time. That's the story."

"Why didn't they come up, Mom?"

"Well, 'cause. Right after we got up here, Earth got in an atom war. They blew each other up terribly. They forgot us. When they finished fighting, after years, they didn't have any rockets. Took them until recently to build more. So here they come now, twenty years later, to

visit.” She gazed at her children numbly and then began to walk. “You wait here. I’m going down the line to Elizabeth Brown’s house. You promise to stay?”

“We don’t want to but we will.”

“All right, then.” And she ran off down the road.

At the Browns’ she arrived in time to see everybody packed into the family car. “Hey there, Hattie! Come on along!”

“Where you going?” she said, breathlessly running up.

“To see the white man!”

“That’s right,” said Mr. Brown seriously. He waved at his load. “These children never saw one, and I almost forgot.”

“What you going to do with that white man?” asked Hattie.

“Do?” said everyone. “Why—just look at him, is all.”

“You sure?”

“What else can we do?”

“I don’t know,” said Hattie. “I just thought there might be trouble.”

“What kind of trouble?”

“You know,” said Hattie vaguely, embarrassed. “You ain’t going to lynch him?”

“Lynch him?” Everyone laughed. Mr. Brown slapped his knee. “Why, bless you, child, no! We’re going to shake his hand. Ain’t we, everyone?”

“Sure, sure!”

Another car drove up from another direction and Hattie gave a cry.

“Willie!”

“What you doing ’way down here? Where’re the kids?” shouted her husband angrily. He glared at the others. “You going down like a bunch of fools to see that man come in?”

“That appears to be just right,” agreed Mr. Brown, nodding and smiling.

“Well, take your guns along,” said Willie. “I’m on my way home for mine right now!”

“Willie!”

“You get in this car, Hattie.” He held the door open firmly, looking at her until she obeyed. Without another word to the others he roared the car down the dusty road.

“Willie, not so fast!”

“Not so fast, huh? We’ll see about that.” He watched the road tear under the car. “What right they got coming up here this late? Why don’t they leave us in peace? Why didn’t they blow themselves up on that old world and let us be?”

“Willie, that ain’t no Christian way to talk.”

“I’m not feeling Christian,” he said savagely, gripping the wheel. “I’m just feeling mean. After all them years of doing what they did to our folks—my mom and dad, and your mom and dad— You remember? You remember how they hung my father on Knockwood Hill and shot my mother? You remember? Or you got a memory that’s short like the others?”

“I remember,” she said.

“You remember Dr. Phillips and Mr. Burton and their big houses, and my mother’s washing shack, and Dad working when he was old, and the thanks he got was being hung by Dr. Phillips and Mr. Button. Well,” said Willie, “the shoe’s on the other foot now. We’ll see who gets laws passed against him, who gets lynched, who rides the back of streetcars, who gets segregated in shows. We’ll just wait and see.”

“Oh, Willie, you’re talking trouble.”

“Everybody’s talking. Everybody’s thought on this day, thinking it’d never be. Thinking, What kind of day would it be if the white man ever came up here to Mars? But here’s the day, and we can’t run away.

“Ain’t you going to let the white people live up here?”

“Sure.” He smiled, but it was a wide, mean smile, and his eyes were mad. “They can come up and live and work here; why, certainly. All they got to do to deserve it is live in their own small part of town, the slums, and shine our shoes for us, and mop up our trash, and sit in the last row in the balcony. That’s all we ask. And once a week we hang one or two of them. Simple!”

“You don’t sound human, and I don’t like it.”

“You’ll have to get used to it,” he said. He braked the car to a stop before the house and jumped out. “Find my guns and some rope. We’ll do this right.”

“Oh, Willie,” she wailed, and just sat there in the car while he ran up the steps and slammed the front door.

She went along. She didn’t want to go along, but he rattled around in the attic, cursing like a crazy man until he found four guns. She saw the brutal metal of them glittering in the black attic, and she couldn’t see him at all, he was so dark; she heard only his swearing, and at last his long legs came climbing down from the attic in a shower of dust, and he stacked up bunches of brass shells and blew out the gun chambers and clicked shells into them, his face stern and heavy and folded in upon the gnawing bitterness there. “Leave us alone,” he kept muttering, his hands flying away from him suddenly, uncontrolled. “Leave us blame alone, why don’t they?”

“Willie, Willie.”

“You too—you too.” And he gave her the same look, and a pressure of his hatred touched her mind.

Outside the window the boys gabbled to each other. “White as milk, she said. White as milk.”

“White as this old flower, you see?”

“White as a stone, like chalk you write with.”

Willie plunged out of the house. “You children come inside, I’m locking you up. You ain’t seeing no white man, you ain’t talking about them, you ain’t doing nothing. Come on now.”

“But, Daddy——”

He shoved them through the door and went and fetched a bucket of paint and a stencil and from the garage a long thick hairy rope coil into which he fashioned a hangman’s knot, very carefully watching the sky while his hands felt their way at their task.

And then they were in the car, leaving bolls of dust behind them down the road. “Slow up, Willie.”

“This is no slowing-up time,” he said. “This is a hurrying time, and I’m hurrying.”

All along the road people were looking up in the sky, or climbing in their cars, or riding in cars, and guns were sticking up out of some cars like telescopes sighting all the evils of a world coming to an end.

She looked at the guns. “You been talking,” she accused her husband.

“That’s what I been doing,” he grunted, nodding. He watched the road, fiercely. “I stopped at every house and I told them what to do, to get their guns, to get paint, to bring rope and be ready. And here we all are, the welcoming committee, to give them the key to the city. Yes, sir!”

She pressed her thin dark hands together to push away the terror growing in her now, and she felt the car bucket and lurch around other ears. She heard the voices yelling, Hey, Willie, look! and hands holding up ropes and guns as they rushed by! and mouths smiling at them in the swift rushing.

“Here we are,” said Willie, and braked the car into dusty halting and silence. He kicked the door open with a big foot and, laden with weapons, stepped out, lugging them across the airport meadow.

“Have you thought Willie?”

“That’s all I done for twenty years. I was sixteen when I left Earth, and I was glad to leave,” he said. “There wasn’t anything there for me or you or anybody like us. I’ve never been sorry I left. We’ve had peace here, the first time we ever drew a solid breath. Now, come on.

He pushed through the dark crowd which came to meet him.

“Willie, Willie, what we gonna do?” they said.

“Here’s a gun,” he said. “Here’s a gun. Here’s another.” He passed them out with savage jabs of his arms. “Here’s a pistol. Here’s a shotgun.” The people were so close together it looked like one dark body with a thousand arms reaching out to take the weapons. “Willie, Willie.”

His wife stood tall and silent by him, her fluted lips pressed shut, and her large eyes wet and tragic. “Bring the paint,” he said to her. And she lugged a gallon can of yellow paint across the field to where, at that moment a trolley car was pulling up, with a fresh-painted sign on its front, TO THE WHITE MAN’S LANDING, full of talking people who got off and ran across the meadow, stumbling, looking up. Women with picnic boxes, men with straw hats, in shirt sleeves. The streetcar stood humming and empty. Willie climbed up, set the paint cans down, opened them, stirred the paint, tested a brush, drew forth a stencil, and climbed up on a seat.

“Hey, there!” The conductor came around behind him, his coin changer jangling. “What you think you’re doing? Get down off there!”

“You see what I’m doing. Keep your shirt on.”

And Willie began the stenciling in yellow paint. He dabbed on an F and an O and an R with terrible pride in his work. And when he finished it the conductor squinted up and read the fresh glinting yellow words: FOR WHITES: REAR SECTION. He read it again. FOR WHITES. He blinked. REAR SECTION. The conductor looked at Willie and began to smile.

“Does that suit you?” asked Willie, stepping down.

Said the conductor, “That suits me just fine, sir.”

Hattie was looking at the sign from outside, and holding her hands over her breasts.

Willie returned to the crowd, which was growing now, taking size from every auto that groaned to a halt, and every new trolley car which squealed around the bend from the nearby town.

Willie climbed up on a packing box. "Let's have a delegation to paint every streetcar in the next hour. Volunteers?"

Hands leapt up.

"Get going!"

They went.

"Let's have a delegation to fix theater seats, roped off, the last two rows for whites."

More hands.

"Go on!"

They ran off.

Willie peered around, bubbled with perspiration, panting with exertion, proud of his energy, his hand on his wife's shoulder who stood under him looking at the ground with her downcast eyes. "Let's see now," he declared. "Oh yes. We got to pass a law this afternoon; no intermarriages!"

"That's right," said a lot of people.

"All shoeshine boys quit their jobs today."

"Quittin' right now!" Some men threw down the rags they carried, in their excitement, all across town.

"Got to pass a minimum wage law, don't we?"

"Sure!"

"Pay them white folks at least ten cents an hour."

"That's right!"

The mayor of the town hurried up. "Now look here, Willie Johnson. Get down off that box!"



“Mayor, I can’t be made to do nothing like that.”

“You’re making a mob, Willie Johnson.”

“That’s the idea.”

“The same thing you always hated when you were a kid. You’re no better than some of those white men you yell about!”

“This is the other shoe, Mayor, and the other foot,” said Willie, not even looking at the mayor, looking at the faces beneath him, some of them smiling, some of them doubtful, others bewildered, some of them reluctant and drawing away, fearful.

“You’ll be sorry,” said the mayor.

“We’ll have an election and get a new mayor,” said Willie. And he glanced off at the town where up and down the streets signs were being hung, fresh-painted: LIMITED CLIENTELE: Right to serve customer revokable at any time.

He grinned and slapped his hands. Lord! And streetcars were being halted and sections being painted white in back, to suggest their future inhabitants. And theaters were being invaded and roped off by chuckling men, while their wives stood wondering on the curbs and children were spanked into houses to be hid away from this awful time.

“Are we all ready?” called Willie Johnson, the rope in his hands with the noose tied and neat.

“Ready!” shouted half the crowd. The other half murmured and moved like figures in a nightmare in which they wished no participation.

“Here it comes!” called a small boy.

Like marionette heads on a single string, the heads of the crowd turned upward.

Across the sky, very high and beautiful, a rocket burned on a sweep of orange fire. It circled and came down, causing all to gasp. It landed,

setting the meadow afire here and there; the fire burned out, the rocket lay a moment in quiet, and then, as the silent crowd watched, a great door in the side of the vessel whispered out a breath of oxygen, the door slid back and an old man stepped out.

“A white man, a white man, a white man . . .” The words traveled back in the expectant crowd, the children speaking in each other’s ears, whispering, butting each other, the words moving in ripples to where the crowd stopped and the streetcars stood in the windy sunlight, the smell of paint coming out their opened windows. The whispering wore itself away and it was gone.

No one moved.

The white man was tall and straight but a deep weariness was in his face. He had not shaved this day, and his eyes were as old as the eyes of a man can be and still be alive. His eyes were colorless; almost white and sightless with things he had seen in the passing years. He was as thin as a winter bush. His hands trembled and he had to lean against the portway of the ship as he looked out over the crowd.

He put out a hand and half smiled, but drew his hand back.

No one moved.

He looked down into their faces, and perhaps he saw but did not see the guns and the ropes, and perhaps he smelled the paint. No one ever asked him. He began to talk. He started very quietly and slowly, expecting no interruptions, and receiving none, and his voice was very tired and old and pale.

“It doesn’t matter who I am,” he said. “I’d be just a name to you, anyhow. I don’t know your names, either. That’ll come later.” He paused, closed his eyes for a moment, and then continued:

“Twenty years ago you left Earth. That’s a long, long time. It’s more like twenty centuries, so much has happened. After you left, the War came.” He nodded slowly. “Yes, the big one. The Third One.

It went on for a long time. Until last year. We bombed all of the cities of the world. We destroyed New York and London and Moscow and Paris and Shanghai and Bombay and Alexandria. We ruined it all. And when we finished with the big cities we went to the little cities and atom-bombed and burned them.”

Now he began to name cities and places, and streets. And as he named them, a murmur rose up in his audience.

“We destroyed Natchez . . .”

A murmur.

“And Columbus, Georgia . . .”

Another murmur.

“We burned New Orleans . . .”

A sigh.

“And Atlanta . . .”

Still another.

“And there was nothing left of Greenwater, Alabama.”

Willie Johnson jerked his head and his mouth opened. Hattie saw this gesture, and the recognition coming into his dark eyes.

“Nothing was left,” said the old man in the port, speaking slowly.

“Cotton fields, burned.”

Oh, said everyone.

“Cotton mills bombed out——”

“Oh?”

“And the factories, radioactive; everything radioactive. All the roads and the farms and the foods, radioactive. Everything.” He named more names of towns and villages.

“Tampa.”

“That’s my town,” someone whispered.

“Fulton.”

“That’s mine,” someone else said.

“Memphis.”

“Memphis. Did they burn Memphis?” A shocked query.

“Memphis, blown up.  
“Fourth Street in Memphis?”  
“All of it,” said the old man.

It was stirring them now. After twenty years it was rushing back. The towns and the places, the trees and the brick buildings, the signs and the churches and the familiar stores, all of it was coming to the surface among the gathered people. Each name touched memory, and there was no one present without a thought of another day. They were all old enough for that, save the children.

“Laredo.”  
“I remember Laredo.”  
“New York City.”  
“I had a store in Harlem.”  
“Harlem, bombed out.”

The ominous words. The familiar, remembered places. The struggle to imagine all of those places in ruins.  
Willie Johnson murmured the words, “Greenwater, Alabama. That’s where I was born. I remember.”  
Gone. All of it gone. The man said so.

The man continued, “So we destroyed everything and ruined everything, like the fools that we were and the fools that we are. We killed millions. I don’t think there are more than five hundred thousand people left in the world, all kinds and types. And out of all the wreckage we salvaged enough metal to build this one rocket, and we came to Mars in it this month to seek your help.”

He hesitated and looked down among the faces to see what could be found there, but he was uncertain.  
Hattie Johnson felt her husband’s arm tense, saw his fingers grip the rope.

“We’ve been fools,” said the old man quietly. “We’ve brought the Earth and civilization down about our heads. None of the cities are worth

saving—they'll be radioactive for a century. Earth is over and done with. Its age is through.

You have rockets here which you haven't tried to use to return to Earth in twenty years. Now I've come to ask you to use them. To come to Earth, to pick up the survivors and bring them back to Mars. To help us go on at this time. We've been stupid. Before God we admit our stupidity and our evilness. All the Chinese and the Indians and the Russians and the British and the Americans.

We're asking to be taken in. Your Martian soil has lain fallow for numberless centuries; there's room for everyone; it's good soil—I've seen your fields from above. We'll come and work it for you. Yes, we'll even do that. We deserve anything you want to do to us, but don't shut us out. We can't force you to act now.

If you want I'll get into my ship and go back and that will be all there is to it. We won't bother you again. But we'll come here and we'll work for you and do the things you did for us—clean your houses, cook your meals, shine your shoes, and humble ourselves in the sight of God for the things we have done over the centuries to ourselves, to others, to you.

He was finished.

There was a silence of silences. A silence you could hold in your hand and a silence that came down like a pressure of a distant storm over the crowd. Their long arms hung like dark pendulums in the sunlight, and their eyes were upon the old man and he did not move now, but waited.

Willie Johnson held the rope in his hands. Those around him watched to see what he might do. His wife Hattie waited, clutching his arm.

She wanted to get at the hate of them all, to pry at it and work at it until she found a little chink, and then pull out a pebble or a stone or a brick and then a part of the wall, and, once started, the whole edifice might roar down and be done away with.

It was teetering now. But which was the keystone, and how to get at it? How to touch them and get a thing started in all of them to make a ruin of their hate?

She looked at Willie there in the strong silence and the only thing she knew about the situation was him and his life and what had happened to him, and suddenly he was the keystone; suddenly she knew that if he could be pried loose, then the thing in all of them might be loosened and torn away.

“Mister—” She stepped forward. She didn’t even know the first words to say. The crowd stared at her back; she felt them staring. “Mister—” The man turned to her with a tired smile.

“Mister,” she said, “do you know Knockwood Hill in Greenwater, Alabama?”

The old man spoke over his shoulder to someone within the ship. A moment later a photographic map was handed out and the man held it, waiting.

“You know the big oak on top of that hill, mister?” The big oak. The place where Willie’s father was shot and hung and found swinging in the morning wind.

“Yes.”

“Is that still there?” asked Hattie.

“It’s gone,” said the old man. “Blown up. The hill’s all gone, and the oak tree too. You see?” He touched the photograph.

“Let me see that,” said Willie, jerking forward and looking at the map. Hattie blinked at the white man, heart pounding.

“Tell me about Greenwater,” she said quickly.

“What do you want to know?”

“About Dr. Phillips. Is he still alive?”

A moment in which the information was found in a clicking machine within the rocket .

“Killed in the war.”

“And his son?”

“Dead.”

“What about their house?”

“Burned. Like all the other houses.”

“What about that other big tree on Knockwood Hill?”

“All the trees went—burned.”

“That tree went, you’re sure?” said Willie.

“Yes.”

Willie’s body loosened somewhat.

“And what about that Mr. Burton’s house and Mr. Burton?”

“No houses at all left, no people.”

“You know Mrs. Johnson’s washing shack, my mother’s place?”

The place where she was shot.

“That’s gone too. Everything’s gone. Here are the pictures, you can see for yourself.”

The pictures were there to be held and looked at and thought about. The rocket was full of pictures and answers to questions. Any town, any building, any place.

Willie stood with the rope in his hands.

He was remembering Earth, the green Earth and the green town where he was born and raised, and he was thinking now of that town, gone to pieces, to ruin, blown up and scattered, all of the landmarks with it, all of the supposed or certain evil scattered with it, all of the hard men gone, the stables, the ironsmiths, the curio shops, the soda founts, the gin mills, the river bridges, the lynching trees, the buckshot-covered hills, the roads, the cows, the mimosas, and his own house as well as those big-pillared houses down near the long river, those white mortuaries where the women as delicate as moths fluttered in the autumn light, distant, far away.

Those houses where the cold men rocked, with glasses of drink in their hands, guns leaned against the porch newels, sniffing the autumn airs and considering death. Gone, all gone; gone and never coming back. Now, for certain, all of that civilization ripped into confetti and strewn at their feet.

Nothing, nothing of it left to hate—not an empty brass gun shell, or a twisted hemp, or a tree, or even a hill of it to hate. Nothing but some alien people in a rocket, people who might shine his shoes and ride in the back of trolleys or sit far up in midnight theaters  
“You won’t have to do that,” said Willie Johnson.

His wife glanced at his big hands.

His fingers were opening.

The rope, released, fell and coiled upon itself along the ground.

They ran through the streets of their town and tore down the new signs so quickly made, and painted out the fresh yellow signs on streetcars, and they cut down the ropes in the theater balconies, and unloaded their guns and stacked their ropes away.

“A new start for everyone,” said Hattie, on the way home in their car.

“Yes,” said Willie at last. “The Lord’s let us come through, a few here and a few there. And what happens next is up to all of us. The time for being fools is over. We got to be something else except fools.

I knew that when he talked. I knew then that now the white man’s as lonely as we’ve always been. He’s got no home now, just like we didn’t have one for so long. Now everything’s even. We can start all over again, on the same level.”



He stopped the car and sat in it, not moving, while Hattie went to let the children out. They ran down to see their father. “You see the white man? You see him?” they cried.

“Yes, sir,” said Willie, sitting behind the wheel, rubbing his face with his slow fingers. “Seems like for the first time today I really seen the white man—I really seen him clear.”

The End