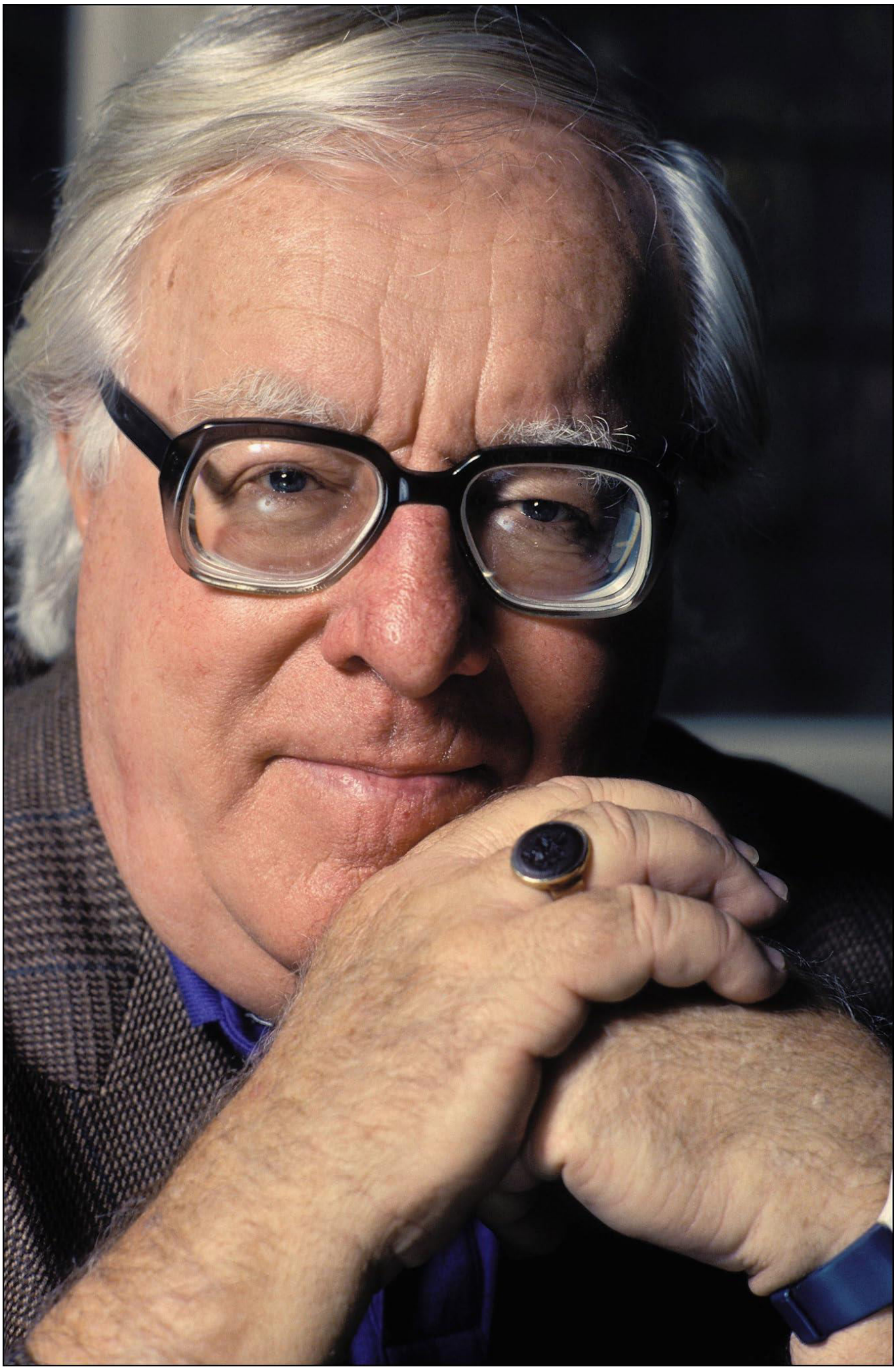

The Swan, Ray Bradbury

The Swan

And out there in the middle of the first day of August, just getting into his car, was Bill Forrester, who shouted he was going downtown for some extraordinary ice cream or other and would anyone join him?

So, not five minutes later, jiggled and steamed into a better mood, Douglas found himself stepping in off the fiery pavements and moving through the grotto of soda-scented air, of vanilla freshness at the drugstore, to sit at the snow-marble fountain with Bill Forrester. They then asked for a recital of the most unusual ices and when the fountain man said, “Old fashioned lime-vanilla ice . . .”

“That’s it!” said Bill Forrester.
“Yes, sir!” said Douglas.

And, while waiting, they turned slowly on their rotating stools. The silver spigots, the gleaming mirrors, the hushed whirl-around ceiling fans, the green shades over the small windows, the harp-wire chairs, passed under their moving gaze. They stopped turning. Their eyes had touched upon the face and form of Miss Helen Loomis, ninety-five years old, ice-cream spoon in hand, ice cream in mouth.

“Young man,” she said to Bill Forrester, “you are a person of taste and imagination. Also, you have the will power of ten men; otherwise you would not dare veer away from the common flavors listed on the menu and order, straight out, without quibble or reservation, such an unheard-of thing as lime-vanilla ice.”
He bowed his head solemnly to her.

“Come sit with me, both of you,” she said. “We’ll talk of strange ice creams and such things as we seem to have a bent for. Don’t be afraid; I’ll foot the bill.”
Smiling, they carried their dishes to her table and sat.

“You look like a Spaulding,” she said to the boy. “You’ve got your grandfather’s head. And you, you’re William Forrester. You write for the Chronicle, a good enough column. I’ve heard more about you than I’d care to tell.”

“I know you,” said Bill Forrester. “You’re Helen Loomis.” He hesitated, then continued. “I was in love with you once,” he said.

“Now that’s the way I like a conversation to open.” She dug quietly at her ice cream. “That’s grounds for another meeting. No—don’t tell me where or when or how you were in love with me. We’ll save that for next time.

You’ve taken away my appetite with your talk. Look there now! Well, I must get home anyway. Since you’re a reporter, come for tea tomorrow between three and four; it’s just possible I can sketch out the history of this town, since it was a trading post, for you. And, so we’ll both have something for our curiosity to chew on, Mr. Forrester, you remind me of a gentleman I went with seventy, yes, seventy years ago.”

She sat across from them and it was like talking with a gray and lost quivering moth. The voice came from far away inside the grayness and the oldness, wrapped in the powders of pressed flowers and ancient butterflies.
“Well.” She arose. “Will you come tomorrow?”
“I most certainly will,” said Bill Forrester.

And she went off into the town on business, leaving the young boy and the young man there, looking after her, slowly finishing their ice cream.

William Forrester spent the next morning checking some local news items for the paper, had time after lunch for some fishing in the river outside town, caught only some small fish which he threw back happily, and, without thinking about it, or at least not noticing that he had thought about it, at three o’clock he found his car taking him down a certain street. He watched with interest as his hands turned the

steering wheel and motored him up a vast circular drive where he stopped under an ivy-covered entry.

Letting himself out, he was conscious of the fact that his car was like his pipe—old, chewed-on, unkempt in this huge green garden by this freshly painted, three-story Victorian house. He saw a faint ghostlike movement at the far end of the garden, heard a whispery cry, and saw that Miss Loomis was there, removed across time and distance, seated alone, the tea service glittering its soft silver surfaces, waiting for him.

“This is the first time a woman has ever been ready and waiting,” he said, walking up. “It is also,” he admitted, “the first time in my life I have been on time for an appointment.”
“Why is that?” she asked, propped back in her wicker chair.

“I don’t know,” he admitted.
“Well.” She started pouring tea. “To start things off, what do you think of the world?”
“I don’t know anything.”

“The beginning of wisdom, as they say. When you’re seventeen you know everything. When you’re twenty-seven if you still know everything you’re still seventeen.”
“You seem to have learned quite a lot over the years.”

“It is the privilege of old people to seem to know everything. But it’s an act and a mask, like every other act and mask. Between ourselves, we old ones wink at each other and smile, saying, How do you like my mask, my act, my certainty? Isn’t life a play? Don’t I play it well?”

They both laughed quietly. He sat back and let the laughter come naturally from his mouth for the first time in many months. When they quieted she held her teacup in her two hands and looked into it. “Do you know, it’s lucky we met so late. I wouldn’t have wanted you to meet me when I was twenty-one and full of foolishness.”

“They have special laws for pretty girls twenty-one.”

“So you think I was pretty?”
He nodded good-humoredly.

“But how can you tell?” she asked. “When you meet a dragon that has eaten a swan, do you guess by the few feathers left around the mouth? That’s what it is—a body like this is a dragon, all scales and folds. So the dragon ate the white swan. I haven’t seen her for years. I can’t even remember what she looks like. I feel her, though. She’s safe inside, still alive; the essential swan hasn’t changed a feather.

Do you know, there are some mornings in spring or fall, when I wake and think, I’ll run across the fields into the woods and pick wild strawberries! Or I’ll swim in the lake, or I’ll dance all night tonight until dawn! And then, in a rage, discover I’m in this old and ruined dragon. I’m the princess in the crumbled tower, no way out, waiting for her Prince Charming.”

“You should have written books.”
“My dear boy, I have written. What else was there for an old maid? I was a crazy creature with a headful of carnival spangles until I was thirty, and then the only man I ever really cared for stopped waiting and married someone else. So in spite, in anger at myself, I told myself I deserved my fate for not having married when the best chance was at hand. I started traveling. My luggage was snowed under blizzards of travel stickers.

I have been alone in Paris, alone in Vienna, alone in London, and all in all, it is very much like being alone in Green Town, Illinois. It is, in essence, being alone. Oh, you have plenty of time to think, improve your manners, sharpen your conversations. But I sometimes think I could easily trade a verb tense or a curtsy for some company that would stay over for a thirty-year weekend.”

They drank their tea.
“Oh, such a rush of self-pity,” she said good-naturedly. “About yourself, now. You’re thirty-one and still not married?”

“Let me put it this way,” he said. “Women who act and think and talk like you are rare.”

“My,” she said seriously, “you mustn’t expect young women to talk like me. That comes later. They’re much too young, first of all. And secondly, the average man runs helter-skelter the moment he finds anything like a brain in a lady. You’ve probably met quite a few brainy ones who hid it most successfully from you. You’ll have to pry around a bit to find the odd beetle. Lift a few boards.”

They were laughing again.
“I shall probably be a meticulous old bachelor,” he said.

“No, no, you mustn’t do that. It wouldn’t be right. You shouldn’t even be here this afternoon. This is a street which ends only in an Egyptian pyramid. Pyramids are all very nice, but mummies are hardly fit companions. Where would you like to go, what would you really like to do with your life?”

“See Istanbul, Port Said, Nairobi, Budapest. Write a book. Smoke too many cigarettes. Fall off a cliff, but get caught in a tree halfway down. Get shot at a few times in a dark alley on a Moroccan midnight. Love a beautiful woman.”

“Well, I don’t think I can provide them all,” she said. “But I’ve traveled and I can tell you about many of those places. And if you’d care to run across my front lawn tonight about eleven and if I’m still awake, I’ll fire off a Civil War musket at you. Will that satisfy your masculine urge for adventure?”
“That would be just fine.”

“Where would you like to go first? I can take you there, you know. I can weave a spell. Just name it. London? Cairo? Cairo makes your face turn on like a light. So let’s go to Cairo. Just relax now. Put some of that nice tobacco in that pipe of yours and sit back.”

He sat back, lit his pipe, half smiling, relaxing, and listened, and she began to talk. “Cairo . . .” she said.

The hour passed in jewels and alleys and winds from the Egyptian desert. The sun was golden and the Nile was muddy where it lapped down to the deltas, and there was someone very young and very quick at the top of the pyramid, laughing, calling to him to come on up the shadowy side into the sun, and he was climbing, she putting her hand down to help him up the last step, and then they were laughing on camel back, loping toward the great stretched bulk of the Sphinx, and late at night, in the native quarter, there was the tinkle of small hammers on bronze and silver, and music from some stringed instruments fading away and away and away. . . .

William Forrester opened his eyes. Miss Helen Loomis had finished the adventure and they were home again, very familiar to each other, on the best of terms, in the garden, the tea cold in the silver pourer, the biscuits dried in the latened sun. He sighed and stretched and sighed again.

“I’ve never been so comfortable in my life.”
“Nor I.”
“I’ve kept you late. I should have gone an hour ago.”

“You know I love every minute of it. But what you should see in an old silly woman . . .”
He lay back in his chair and half closed his eyes and looked at her. He squinted his eyes so the merest filament of light came through. He tilted his head ever so little this way, then that.

“What are you doing?” she asked uncomfortably.
He said nothing, but continued looking.

“If you do this just right,” he murmured, “you can adjust, make allowances. . . .” To himself he was thinking, You can erase lines, adjust the time factor, turn back the years.
Suddenly he started.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

But then it was gone. He opened his eyes to catch it. That was a mistake. He should have stayed back, idling, erasing, his eyes gently half closed.
“For just a moment,” he said, “I saw it.”
“Saw what?”

“The swan, of course,” he thought. His mouth must have pantomimed the words.
The next instant she was sitting very straight in her chair. Her hands were in her lap, rigid. Her eyes were fixed upon him and as he watched, feeling helpless, each of her eyes cupped and brimmed itself full.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “terribly sorry.”
“No, don’t be.” She held herself rigid and did not touch her face or her eyes; her hands remained, one atop the other, holding on. “You’d better go now. Yes, you may come tomorrow, but go now, please, and don’t say any more.”

He walked off through the garden, leaving her by her table in the shade. He could not bring himself to look back.
Four days, eight days, twelve days passed, and he was invited to teas, to suppers, to lunches. They sat talking through the long green afternoons—they talked of art, of literature, of life, of society and politics. They ate ice creams and squabs and drank good wines.

“I don’t care what anyone says,” she said. “And people are saying things, aren’t they?”
He shifted uneasily.
“I knew it. A woman’s never safe, even when ninety-five, from gossip.”
“I could stop visiting.”

“Oh, no,” she cried, and recovered. In a quieter voice she said, “You know you can’t do that. You know you don’t care what they think, do you? So long as we know it’s all right?”
“I don’t care,” he said.

“Now”—she settled back—“let’s play our game. Where shall it be this time? Paris? I think Paris.”
“Paris,” he said, nodding quietly.

“Well,” she began, “it’s the year 1885 and we’re boarding the ship in New York harbor. There’s our luggage, here are our tickets, there goes the sky line. Now we’re at sea. Now we’re coming into Marseilles. . . .”

Here she was on a bridge looking into the clear waters of the Seine, and here he was, suddenly, a moment later, beside her, looking down at the tides of summer flowing past. Here she was with an apéritif in her talcum-white fingers, and here he was, with amazing quickness, bending toward her to tap her wineglass with his. His face appeared in mirrored halls at Versailles, over steaming smörgåsbords in Stockholm, and they counted the barber poles in the Venice canals. The things she had done alone, they were now doing together.

In the middle of August they sat staring at one another one late afternoon.
“Do you realize,” he said, “I’ve seen you nearly every day for two and a half weeks?”
“Impossible!”

“I’ve enjoyed it immensely.”
“Yes, but there are so many young girls . . .”

“You’re everything they are not—kind, intelligent, witty.”

“Nonsense. Kindness and intelligence are the preoccupations of age. Being cruel and thoughtless is far more fascinating when you’re twenty.” She paused and drew a breath. “Now, I’m going to embarrass you.

Do you recall that first afternoon we met in the soda fountain, you said that you had had some degree of—shall we say affection for me at one

time? You've purposely put me off on this by never mentioning it again. Now I'm forced to ask you to explain the whole uncomfortable thing."

He didn't seem to know what to say. "That's embarrassing," he protested.
"Spit it out!"
"I saw your picture once, years ago."
"I never let my picture be taken."
"This was an old one, taken when you were twenty."

"Oh, that. It's quite a joke. Each time I give to a charity or attend a ball they dust that picture off and print it. Everyone in town laughs; even I."
"It's cruel of the paper."

"No. I told them, If you want a picture of me, use the one taken back in 1853. Let them remember me that way. Keep the lid down, in the name of the good Lord, during the service."
"I'll tell you all about it." He folded his hands and looked at them and paused a moment. He was remembering the picture now and it was very clear in his mind.

There was time, here in the garden to think of every aspect of the photograph and of Helen Loomis, very young, posing for her picture the first time, alone and beautiful. He thought of her quiet, shyly smiling face.

It was the face of spring, it was the face of summer, it was the warmness of clover breath. Pomegranate glowed in her lips, and the noon sky in her eyes. To touch her face was that always new experience of opening your window one December morning, early, and putting out your hand to the first white cool powdering of snow that had come, silently, with no announcement, in the night.

And all of this, this breath-warmness and plum-tenderness was held forever in one miracle of photographic chemistry which no clock winds could blow upon to change one hour or one second; this fine first cool white snow would never melt, but live a thousand summers.

That was the photograph; that was the way he knew her. Now he was talking again, after the remembering and the thinking over and the holding of the picture in his mind. “When I first saw that picture—it was a simple, straightforward picture with a simple hairdo—I didn’t know it had been taken that long ago.

The item in the paper said something about Helen Loomis marshaling the Town Ball that night. I tore the picture from the paper. I carried it with me all that day. I intended going to the ball. Then, late in the afternoon, someone saw me looking at the picture, and told me about it.

How the picture of the beautiful girl had been taken so long ago and used every year since by the paper. And they said I shouldn’t go to the Town Ball that night, carrying that picture and looking for you.”

They sat in the garden for a long minute. He glanced over at her face. She was looking at the farthest garden wall and the pink roses climbing there. There was no way to tell what she was thinking. Her face showed nothing. She rocked for a little while in her chair and then said softly, “Shall we have some more tea? There you are.”

They sat sipping the tea. Then she reached over and patted his arm.
“Thank you.”
“For what?”
“For wanting to come to find me at the dance, for clipping out my picture, for everything. Thank you so very much.”
They walked about the garden on the paths.

“And now,” she said, “it’s my turn. Do you remember, I mentioned a certain young man who once attended me, seventy years ago? Oh, he’s been dead fifty years now, at least, but when he was very young and very handsome he rode a fast horse off for days, or on summer nights over the meadows around town.

He had a healthy, wild face, always sunburned, his hands were always cut and he fumed like a stovepipe and walked as if he were going to fly apart; wouldn't keep a job, quit those he had when he felt like it, and one day he sort of rode off away from me because I was even wilder than he and wouldn't settle down, and that was that.

I never thought the day would come when I would see him alive again. But you're pretty much alive, you spill ashes around like he did, you're clumsy and graceful combined, I know everything you're going to do before you do it, but after you've done it I'm always surprised. Reincarnation's a lot of milk-mush to me, but the other day I felt, What if I called Robert, Robert, to you on the street, would William Forrester turn around?"

"I don't know," he said.
"Neither do I. That's what makes life interesting."

August was almost over. The first cool touch of autumn moved slowly through the town and there was a softening and the first gradual burning fever of color in every tree, a faint flush and coloring in the hills, and the color of lions in the wheat fields. Now the pattern of days was familiar and repeated like a penman beautifully inscribing again and again, in practice, a series of l's and w's and m's, day after day the line repeated in delicate rills.

William Forrester walked across the garden one early August afternoon to find Helen Loomis writing with great care at the tea table.
She put aside her pen and ink.
"I've been writing you a letter," she said.
"Well, my being here saves you the trouble."

"No, this is a special letter. Look at it." She showed him the blue envelope, which she now sealed and pressed flat. "Remember how it looks. When you receive this in the mail, you'll know I'm dead."

"That's no way to talk, is it?"
"Sit down and listen to me."

He sat.

“My dear William,” she said, under the parasol shade. “In a few days I will be dead. No.” She put up her hand. “I don’t want you to say a thing. I’m not afraid. When you live as long as I’ve lived you lose that, too. I never liked lobster in my life, and mainly because I’d never tried it.

On my eightieth birthday I tried it. I can’t say I’m greatly excited over lobster still, but I have no doubt as to its taste now, and I don’t fear it.

I dare say death will be a lobster, too, and I can come to terms with it.” She motioned with her hands. “But enough of that. The important thing is that I shan’t be seeing you again. There will be no services. I believe that a woman who has passed through that particular door has as much right to privacy as a woman who has retired for the night.”

“You can’t predict death,” he said at last.

“For fifty years I’ve watched the grandfather clock in the hall, William. After it is wound I can predict to the hour when it will stop. Old people are no different. They can feel the machinery slow down and the last weights shift. Oh, please don’t look that way—please don’t.”
“I can’t help it,” he said.

“We’ve had a nice time, haven’t we? It has been very special here, talking every day. It was that much-overburdened and worn phrase referred to as a ‘meeting of the minds.’” She turned the blue envelope in her hands. “I’ve always known that the quality of love was the mind, even though the body sometimes refuses this knowledge. The body lives for itself. It lives only to feed and wait for the night.

It’s essentially nocturnal. But what of the mind which is born of the sun, William, and must spend thousands of hours of a lifetime awake and aware? Can you balance off the body, that pitiful, selfish thing of night against a whole lifetime of sun and intellect? I don’t know. I only know there has been your mind here and my mind here, and the afternoons

have been like none I can remember. There is still so much to talk about, but we must save it for another time."

"We don't seem to have much time now."
"No, but perhaps there will be another time. Time is so strange and life is twice as strange. The cogs miss, the wheels turn, and lives interlace too early or too late. I lived too long, that much is certain. And you were born either too early or too late.

It was a terrible bit of timing. But perhaps I am being punished for being a silly girl. Anyway, the next spin around, wheels might function right again. Meantime you must find a nice girl and be married and be happy. But you must promise me one thing."

"Anything."
"You must promise me not to live to be too old, William. If it is at all convenient, die before you're fifty. It may take a bit of doing. But I advise this simply because there is no telling when another Helen Loomis might be born.

It would be dreadful, wouldn't it, if you lived on to be very, very old and some afternoon in 1999 walked down Main Street and saw me standing there, aged twenty-one, and the whole thing out of balance again?

I don't think we could go through any more afternoons like these we've had, no matter how pleasant, do you? A thousand gallons of tea and five hundred biscuits is enough for one friendship. So you must have an attack of pneumonia some time in about twenty years.

For I don't know how long they let you linger on the other side. Perhaps they send you back immediately. But I shall do my best, William, really I shall. And everything put right and in balance, do you know what might happen?"

"You tell me."
"Some afternoon in 1985 or 1990 a young man named Tom Smith or John Green, or a name like that, will be walking downtown and will stop

in the drugstore and order, appropriately, a dish of some unusual ice cream.

A young girl the same age will be sitting there and when she hears the name of that ice cream, something will happen. I can't say what or how. She won't know why or how, assuredly.

Nor will the young man. It will simply be that the name of that ice cream will be a very good thing to both of them. They'll talk. And later, when they know each other's names, they'll walk from the drugstore together."

She smiled at him.
"This is all very neat, but forgive an old lady for tying things in neat packets. It's a silly trifle to leave you. Now let's talk of something else. What shall we talk about? Is there any place in the world we haven't traveled to yet? Have we been to Stockholm?"

"Yes, it's a fine town."
"Glasgow? Yes? Where then?"
"Why not Green Town, Illinois?" he said. "Here. We haven't really visited our own town together at all."

She settled back, as did he, and she said, "I'll tell you how it was, then, when I was only nineteen, in this town, a long time ago. . . ."

It was a night in winter and she was skating lightly over a pond of white moon ice, her image gliding and whispering under her. It was a night in summer in this town of fire in the air, in the cheeks, in the heart, your eyes full of the glowing and shutting-off color of fireflies.

It was a rustling night in October, and there she stood, pulling taffy from a hook in the kitchen, singing, and there she was, running on the moss by the river, and swimming in the granite pit beyond town on a spring night, in the soft deep warm waters, and now it was the Fourth of July with rockets slamming the sky and every porch full of now red-

fire, now blue-fire, now white-fire faces, hers dazzling bright among them as the last rocket died.

“Can you see all these things?” asked Helen Loomis. “Can you see me doing them and being with them?”

“Yes,” said William Forrester, eyes closed. “I can see you.”
“And then,” she said, “and then . . .”

Her voice moved on and on as the afternoon grew late and the twilight deepened quickly, but her voice moved in the garden and anyone passing on the road, at a far distance, could have heard its moth sound, faintly, faintly. . . .

Two days later William Forrester was at his desk in his room when the letter came. Douglas brought it upstairs and handed it to Bill and looked as if he knew what was in it.
William Forrester recognized the blue envelope, but did not open it. He simply put it in his shirt pocket, looked at the boy for a moment, and said, “Come on, Doug; my treat.”

They walked downtown, saying very little, Douglas preserving the silence he sensed was necessary. Autumn, which had threatened for a time, was gone. Summer was back full, boiling the clouds and scouring the metal sky. They turned in at the drugstore and sat at the marble fountain.

William Forrester took the letter out and laid it before him and still did not open it.
He looked out at the yellow sunlight on the concrete and on the green awnings and shining on the gold letters of the window signs across the street, and he looked at the calendar on the wall.

August 27, 1928. He looked at his wrist watch and felt his heartbeat slowly, saw the second hand of the watch moving moving with no speed at all, saw the calendar frozen there with its one day seeming

forever, the sun nailed to the sky with no motion toward sunset whatever.

The warm air spread under the sighing fans over his head. A number of women laughed by the open door and were gone through his vision, which was focused beyond them at the town itself and the high courthouse clock. He opened the letter and began to read.

He turned slowly on the revolving chair. He tried the words again and again, silently, on his tongue, and at last spoke them aloud and repeated them.

“A dish of lime-vanilla ice,” he said. “A dish of lime-vanilla ice.”

The End