

The Wandering Witch, Ray Bradbury

The Wandering Witch

Into the air, over the valleys, under the stars, above a river, a pond, a road, flew Cecy. Invisible as autumn winds, fresh as the breath of clover rising from twilight fields, she flew. She soared in doves as soft as white ermine, stopped in trees and lived in leaves, showering away in fiery hues when the breeze blew. She perched in a lime-green frog, cool as mint by a shining pool. She trotted in a brambly dog and barked to hear echoes from the sides of distant barns. She lived in dandelion ghosts or sweet clear liquids rising from the musky earth.

Farewell summer, thought Cecy. I'll be in every living thing in the world tonight.

Now she inhabited neat crickets on the tar-pool roads, now prickled in dew on an iron gate.

"Love," she said. "Where is my love!?"

She had said it at supper. And her parents had stiffened back in their chairs. "Patience," they advised. "Remember, you're remarkable. Our whole Family is odd and remarkable. We must not marry with ordinary folk. We'd lose our dark souls if we did. You wouldn't want to lose your ability to 'travel' by wish and desire, would you? Then be careful. Careful!"

But in her high attic room, Cecy had touched perfume to her throat and stretched out, trembling and apprehensive, on her four-poster, as a moon the color of milk rose over Illinois country, turning rivers to cream and roads to platinum.

"Yes," she sighed. "I'm one of an odd family that flies nights like black kites. I can live in anything at all a pebble, a crocus, or a praying mantis. Now!"

The wind whipped her away over fields and meadows. She saw the warm lights of cottages and farms glowing with twilight colors.

If I can't be in love, myself, she thought, because I'm odd, then I'll be in love through someone else!

Outside a farmhouse in the fresh night a dark-haired girl, no more than nineteen, drew up water from a deep stone well, singing.

Cecy fell a dry leaf into the well. She lay in the tender moss of the well, gazing up through dark coolness. Now she quickened in a fluttering, invisible amoeba. Now in a water droplet! At last, within a cold cup, she felt herself lifted to the girl's warm lips. There was a soft night sound of drinking.

Cecy looked out from the girl's eyes.

She entered into the dark head and gazed from the shining eyes at the hands pulling the rough rope. She listened through the shell ears to this girl's world. She smelled a particular universe through these delicate nostrils, felt this special heart beating, beating. Felt this strange tongue move with singing.

The girl gasped. She stared into the night meadows.

"Who's there?"

No answer.

Only the wind, whispered Cecy.

"Only the wind." The girl laughed, but shivered.

It was a good body, this girl's. It held bones of finest slender ivory hidden and roundly fleshed. This brain was like a pink tea rose, hung in darkness, and there was cider wine in this mouth. The lips lay firm on the white, white teeth and the brows arched neatly at the world, and the hair blew soft and fine on her milky neck. The pores knit small and close. The nose tilted at the moon and the cheeks glowed like small fires. The body drifted with feather-balances from one motion to another and seemed always humming to itself. Being in this body was like basking in a hearth fire, living in the purr of a sleeping cat, stirring in warm creek waters that flowed by night to the sea. Yes! thought Cecy.

"What?" asked the girl, as if she'd heard. What's your name? asked Cecy carefully. "Ann Leary." The girl twitched. "Now why should I say that out loud?"

Ann, Ann, whispered Cecy. Ann, you're going to be in love.

As if to answer this, a great roar sprang from the road, a clatter and a ring of wheels on gravel. A tall man drove up in an open car, holding the wheel with his monstrous arms, his smile glowing across the yard.

"Ann!"

"Is that you, Tom?"

"Who else?" He leaped from the car, laughing.

"I'm not speaking to you!" Ann whirled, the bucket in her hands slopping.

No! cried Cecy.

Ann froze. She looked at the hills and the first stars. She stared at the man named Tom. Cecy made her drop the bucket.

"Look what you've done!"

Tom ran up.

"Look what you made me do!"

He wiped her shoes with a kerchief, laughing.

"Get away!" She kicked at his hands, but he laughed again, and gazing down on him from miles away, Cecy saw the turn of his head, the size of his skull, the flare of his nose, the shine of his eyes, the girth of his shoulders, and the hard strength of his hands doing this delicate thing with the handkerchief. Peering down from the secret attic of this lovely head, Cecy yanked a hidden copper ventriloquist's wire and the pretty mouth popped wide: "Thank you!"

"Oh, so you have manners?" The smell of leather on his hands, the smell of the open car from his clothes into the tender nostrils, and Cecy, far, far away over night meadows and autumn fields, stirred as with some dream in her bed.

"Not for you, no!" said Ann.

Hush, speak gently, said Cecy. She moved Ann's fingers out toward Tom's head. Ann snatched them back.

"I've gone mad!"

"You have." He nodded, smiling but bewildered. "Were you going to touch me?"

"I don't know. Oh, go away!" Her cheeks glowed with pink charcoals.

"Run! I'm not stopping you." Tom got up. "Changed your mind? Will you go to the dance with me tonight?"

"No," said Ann.

Yes! cried Cecy. I've never danced. I've never worn a long gown, all rustly. I want to dance all night. I've never known what it's like to be in a woman, dancing; Father and Mother would not permit. Dogs, cats, locusts, leaves, everything else in the world at one time or another I've known, but never a woman in the spring, never on a night like this. Oh, please we must dance!

She spread her thought like the fingers of a hand within a new glove.

"Yes," said Ann Leary. "I don't know why, but I'll go with you tonight, Tom."

Now inside, quick! cried Cecy. Wash, tell your folks, get your gown, into your room!

"Mother," said Ann, "I've changed my mind!"

The car was roaring down the pike, the rooms of the farmhouse jumped to life, water was churning the bath, the mother was rushing about with a fringe of hairpins in her mouth. "What's come over you, Ann? You don't like Tom!"

"True." Ann stopped amidst the great fever.

But it's farewell summer! thought Cecy. Summer back before the winter comes.

"Summer," said Ann. "Farewell."

Fine for dancing, thought Cecy.

"... dancing," murmured Ann Leary.

Then she was in the tub and the soap creaming on her white seal shoulders, small nests of soap beneath her arms, and the flesh of her warm breasts moving in her hands and Cecy moving the mouth, making the smile, keeping the actions going. There must be no pause, or the entire pantomime might fall in ruins! Ann Leary must be kept moving, doing, acting, wash here, soap there, now out!

"You!" Ann caught herself in the mirror, all whiteness and pinkness like lilies and carnations. "Who are?"

A girl seventeen. Cecy gazed from her violet eyes. You can't see me. Do you know I'm here?

Ann Leary shook her head. "I've loaned my body to a last-of-summer witch, for sure."

Close! laughed Cecy. Now, dress!

The luxury of feeling fine silk move over an ample body! Then the halloo outside.

"Ann, Tom's back!"

"Tell him, wait." Ann sat down. "I'm not going to that dance."

"What?" cried her mother.

Cecy snapped to attention. It had been a fatal moment of leaving Ann's body for an instant. She had heard the distant sound of the car rushing through moonlit country and thought, I'll find Tom, sit in his head and see what it's like to be in a man of twenty-two on a night like this. And so she had started quickly down the road, but now, like a bird to a cage, flew back to clamor in Ann's head.

"Ann!"

"Tell him to leave!"

"Ann!"

But Ann had the bit in her mouth. "No, no, I hate him!"

I shouldn't have left even for a moment. Cecy poured her mind into the hands of the young girl, into the heart, into the head, softly, softly.

Stand up, she thought.

Ann stood.

Put on your coat!

Ann put on her coat.

March!

"No!"

March!

"Ann," said her mother, "get on out there. What's come over you?"

"Nothing, Mother. Good night. We'll be home late."

Ann and Cecy ran together into the vanishing summer night.

A room full of softly dancing pigeons ruffling their quiet, trailing feathers, a room full of peacocks, a room full of rainbow eyes and lights. And in the center of it, around, around, around, danced Ann Leary.

Oh, it is a fine evening, said Cecy.

"Oh, it's a fine evening," said Ann.

"You're odd," said Tom.

The music whirled them in dimness, in rivers of song; they floated, they bobbed, they sank, they rose for air, they gasped, they clutched each other as if drowning and whirled on in fans and whispers and sighs to "Beautiful Ohio."

Cecy hummed. Ann's lips parted. The music came out.

Yes, odd, said Cecy.

"You're not the same," said Tom.

"Not tonight."

"You're not the Ann Leary I knew."

No, not at all, at all, whispered Cecy, miles and miles away. "No, not at all," said the moved lips.

"I've the funniest feeling," said Tom. "About you." He danced her and searched her glowing face, watching for something. "Your eyes, I can't figure it."

Do you see me? asked Cecy.

"You're here, Ann, and you're not." Tom turned her carefully, this way and that.

"Yes."

"Why did you come with me?"

"I didn't want to," said Ann.

"Why, then?"

"Something made me."

"What?"

"I don't know." Ann's voice was faintly hysterical.

Now, now, hush, whispered Cecy. Hush, that's it. Around, around.

They whispered and rustled and rose and fell away in the dark room, with the music turning them.

"But you did come," said Tom.

"I did," said Cecy and Ann.

"Here." And he danced her lightly out an open door and walked her quietly away from the hall and the music and the people.

They climbed in and sat together in his open car. "Ann," he said, taking her hands, trembling. "Ann." But the way he said her name it was as if it wasn't her name. He kept glancing into her pale face, and now her eyes were open again. "I used to love you, you know that," he said. "I know."

"But you've always been distant and I didn't want to be hurt."

"We're very young," said Ann. "No, I mean, I'm sorry," said Cecy. "What do you mean?" Tom dropped her hands. The night was warm and the smell of the earth shimmered up all about them where they sat, and the fresh trees breathed one leaf against another in a shaking and rustling. "I don't know," said Ann.

"Oh, but I know," said Cecy. ""You're tall and you're the finest-looking man in all the world. This is a good evening; this is an evening I'll always remember, being with you." She put out the alien cold hand to find his reluctant hand again and bring it back, and warm it and hold it very tight.

"But," said Tom, blinking, "tonight you're here, you're there. One minute one way, the next minute another. I wanted to take you to the dance tonight for old times' sake. I meant nothing by it when I first asked you. And then, when we were standing at the well, I knew

something had changed, really changed, about you. There was something new and soft, something ... " He groped for a word. "I don't know, I can't say. Something about your voice. And I know I'm in love with you again."

"No," said Cecy. "With me, with me."

"And I'm afraid of being in love with you," he said. "You'll hurt me."

"I might," said Ann.

No, no, I'd love you with all my heart! thought Cecy. Ann, say it for me. Say you'd love him!

Ann said nothing.

Tom moved quietly closer to put his hand on her cheek.

"I've got a job a hundred miles from here. Will you miss me?"

"Yes," said Ann and Cecy.

"May I kiss you goodbye?"

"Yes," said Cecy before anyone else could speak.

He placed his lips to the strange mouth. He kissed the strange mouth and he was trembling.

Ann sat like a white statue.

Ann! said Cecy. Move! Hold him!

Ann sat like a carved doll in the moonlight.

Again he kissed her lips.

"I do love you," whispered Cecy. "I'm here, it's me you see in her eyes, and I love you if she never will."

He moved away and seemed like a man who had run a long distance. "I don't know what's happening. For a moment there ... "

"Yes?"

"For a moment I thought" He put his hands to his eyes. "Never mind. Shall I take you home now?"

"Please," said Ann Leary.

Tiredly he drove the car away. They rode in the thrum and motion of the moonlit car in the still early, only eleven o'clock summer-autumn night, with the shining meadows and empty fields gliding by.

And Cecy, looking at the fields and meadows, thought, It would be worth it, it would be worth everything to be with him from this night on. And she heard her parents' voices again, faintly, "Be careful. You wouldn't want to be diminished, would you married to a mere earthbound crea-ture?"

Yes, yes, thought Cecy, even that I'd give up, here and now, if he would have me. I wouldn't need to roam the lost nights then, I wouldn't need to live in birds and dogs and cats and foxes, I'd need only to be with him. Only him. The road passed under, whispering. "Tom," said Ann at last.

"What?" He stared coldly at the road, the trees, the sky, the stars.
"If you're ever, in years to come, at any time, in Green Town, Illinois, a few miles from here, will you do me a favor?"
"What?"

"Will you do me the favor of stopping and seeing a friend of mine?"
Ann Leary said this haltingly, awkwardly.
"Why?"

"She's a good friend. I've told her of you. I'll give you her address."
When the car stopped at her farm she drew forth a pencil and paper from her small purse and wrote in the moonlight, pressing the paper to her knee. "Can you read it?"

He glanced at the paper and nodded bewilderedly.
He read the words.
"Will you visit her someday?" Ann's mouth moved.
"Someday."
"Promise?"

"What has this to do with us?" he cried savagely. "What do I want with names and papers?" He crumpled the paper into a tight ball.
"Oh, please promise!" begged Cecy.
" ... promise ... " said Ann.

"All right, all right, now let be!" he shouted.

I'm tired, thought Cecy. I can't stay. I must go home. I can only travel a few hours each night, moving, flying. But before I go ...

" ... before I go," said Ann.

She kissed Tom on the lips.

"This is me kissing you," said Cecy.

Tom held her off and looked at Ann Leary and looked deep, deep inside. He said nothing, but his face began to relax slowly, very slowly, and the lines vanished away, and his mouth softened from its hardness, and he looked deep again into the moonlit face held here before him.

Then he lifted her out and without so much as good night drove quickly down the road.

Cecy let go.

Ann Leary, crying out, released from prison, it seemed, raced up the moonlit path to her house and slammed the door.

Cecy lingered for only a little while. In the eyes of a cricket she saw the warm night world. In the eyes of a frog she sat for a lonely moment by a pool. In the eyes of a night bird she looked down from a tall, moon-haunted elm and saw the lights go out in two farmhouses, one here, one a mile away.

She thought of herself and her Family, and her strange power, and the fact that no one in the Family could ever marry any one of the people in this vast world out here beyond the hills.

Tom? Her weakening mind flew in a night bird under the trees and over deep fields of wild mustard. Have you still got the paper, Tom? Will you come by someday, some year, sometime, to see me? Will you know me then? Will you look in my face and remember where it was you saw me last and know that you love me as I love you, with all my heart for all time?

She paused in the cool night air, a million miles from towns and people, above farms and continents and rivers and hills. Tom? Softly.

Tom was asleep. It was deep night; his suit was hung on a chair. And in one silent, carefully upflung hand upon the white pillow, by his head, was a small piece of paper with writing on it.

Slowly, slowly, a fraction of an inch at a time, his fingers closed down upon and held it tightly. And he did not even stir or notice when a blackbird, faintly, wondrously, beat softly for a moment against the clear moon crystals of the windowpane, then, fluttering quietly, stopped and flew away toward the east, over the sleeping earth.

The End