

The Wonderful Death of Dudley Stone, Ray Bradbury

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“Alive!”

“Dead!”

“Alive in New England, damn it.”

“Died twenty years ago!”

“Pass the hat, I’ll go myself and bring back his head!”

That’s how the talk went that night. A stranger set it off with his mouthings about Dudley Stone dead. Alive! we cried. And shouldn’t we know? Weren’t we the last frail remnants of those who had burned incense and read his books by the light of blazing intellectual votives in the twenties?

The Dudley Stone. That magnificent stylist, that proudest of literary lions. Surely you recall the head-pounding, the cliff-jumping, the whistlings of doom that followed on his writing his publishers this note: SIRS: Today, aged 30, I retire from the field, renounce writing, burn all my effects, toss my latest manuscript on the dump, cry hail and fare thee well. Yrs., affect.

Dudley Stone

Earthquakes and avalanches, in that order.

“Why?” we asked ourselves, meeting down the years.

In fine soap-opera fashion we debated if it was women caused him to hurl his literary future away. Was it the Bottle. Or Horses that outran him and stopped a fine pacer in his prime?

We freely admitted to one and all, that were Stone writing now, Faulkner, Hemingway, and Steinbeck would be buried in his lava.

All the sadder that Stone, on the brink of his greatest work, turned one day and went off to live in a town we shall call Obscurity by the sea best named The Past.

“Why?”

That question forever lived with those of us who had seen the glints of genius in his piebald works.

One night a few weeks ago, musing off the erosion of the years, finding each others' faces somewhat more pouched and our hairs more conspicuously in absence, we became enraged over the typical citizen's ignorance of Dudley Stone.

At least, we muttered, Thomas Wolfe had had a full measure of success before he seized his nose and jumped off the rim of Eternity. At least the critics gathered to stare after his plunge into darkness as after a meteor that made much fire in its passing. But who now remembered Dudley Stone, his coteries, his frenzied followers of the twenties?

“Pass the hat,” I said. “I'll travel three hundred miles, grab Dudley Stone by the pants and say: ‘Look here, Mr. Stone, why did you let us down so badly? Why haven't you written a book in twenty-five years?’”

The hat was lined with cash; I sent a telegram and took a train.

I do not know what I expected. Perhaps to find a doddering and frail praying mantis, whispering about the station, blown by seawinds, a chalk-white ghost who would husk at me with the voices of grass and reeds blown in the night.

I clenched my knees in agony as my train chuffed into the station. I let myself down into a lonely country-side, a mile from the sea, like a man foolishly insane, wondering why I had come so far.

On a bulletin board in front of the boarded-up ticket office I found a cluster of announcements, inches thick, pasted and nailed one upon

another for uncountable years. Leafing under, peeling away anthropological layers of printed tissue I found what I wanted.

Dudley Stone for alderman, Dudley Stone for Sheriff, Dudley Stone for Mayor! On up through the years his photograph, bleached by sun and rain, faintly recognizable, asked for ever more responsible positions in the life of this world near the sea. I stood reading them.

“Hey!”

And Dudley Stone plunged across the station platform behind me suddenly. “Is that you, Mr. Douglas!” I whirled to confront this great architecture of a man, big but not in the least fat, his legs huge pistons thrusting him on, a bright flower in his lapel, a bright tie at his neck.

He crushed my hand, looked down upon me like Michelangelo’s God creating Adam with a mighty touch. His face was the face of those illustrated North Winds and South Winds that blow hot and cold in ancient mariners’ charts. It was the face that symbolizes the sun in Egyptian carvings, ablaze with life!

My God! I thought. And this is the man who hasn’t written in twenty-odd years. Impossible. He’s so alive it’s sinful. I can hear his heartbeat! I must have stood with my eyes very wide to let the look of him cram in upon my startled senses.

“You thought you’d find Marley’s Ghost,” he laughed. “Admit it.”

“I—”

“My wife’s waiting with a New England boiled dinner, we’ve plenty of ale and stout. I like the ring of those words. To ale is not to sicken, but to revive the flagging spirit. A tricky word, that. And stout?”

There’s a nice ruddy sound to it. Stout!” A great golden watch bounced on his vestfront, hung in bright chains. He vised my elbow and charmed me along, a magician well on his way back to his cave with a luckless rabbit. “Glad to see you! I suppose you’ve come, as the others came, to ask the same question, eh! Well, this time I’ll tell everything!”

My heart jumped. “Wonderful!”

Behind the empty station sat an open-top 1927-vintage Model-T Ford. “Fresh air. Drive at twilight like this, you get all the fields, the grass, the flowers, coming at you in the wind. I hope you’re not one of those who tiptoe around shutting windows! Our house is like the top of a mesa. We let the weather do our broom-work. Hop in!”

Ten minutes later we swung off the highway onto a drive that had not been leveled or filled in years. Stone drove straight on over the pits and bumps, smiling steadily. Bang! We shuddered the last few yards to a wild, unpainted two-story house. The car was allowed to gasp itself away into mortal silence.

“Do you want the truth?” Stone turned to look me in the face and hold my shoulder with an earnest hand. “I was murdered by a man with a gun twenty-five years ago almost to this very day.”

I sat staring after him as he leaped from the car. He was solid as a ton of rock, no ghost to him, but yet I knew that somehow the truth was in what he had told me before firing himself like a cannon at the house.

“This is my wife, and this is the house, and that is our supper waiting for us! Look at our view. Windows on three sides of the living room, a view of the sea, the shore, the meadows. We nail the windows open three out of four seasons. I swear you get a smell of limes here midsummer, and something from Antarctica, ammonia and ice cream, come December. Sit down! Lena, isn’t it nice having him here?”

“I hope you like New England boiled dinner,” said Lena, now here, now there, a tall, firmly-built woman, the sun in the East, Father Christmas’ daughter, a bright lamp of a face that lit our table as she dealt out the heavy useful dishes made to stand the pound of giants’ fists. The cutlery was solid enough to take a lion’s teeth.

A great whiff of steam rose up, through which we gladly descended, sinners into Hell. I saw the seconds-plate skim by three times and felt the ballast gather in my chest, my throat, and at last my ears. Dudley

Stone poured me a brew he had made from wild Concord grapes that had cried for mercy, he said. The wine bottle, empty, had its green glass mouth blown softly by Stone, who summoned out a rhythmic one-note tune that was quickly done.

“Well, I’ve kept you waiting long enough,” he said, peering at me from that distance which drinking adds between people and which, at odd turns in the evening, seems closeness itself. “I’ll tell you about my murder. I’ve never told anyone before; believe me. Do you know John Oatis Kendall?”

“A minor writer in the twenties, wasn’t he?” I said. “A few books. Burned out by ’31. Died last week.”

“God rest him.” Mr. Stone lapsed into a special brief melancholy from which he revived as he began to speak again.

“Yes. John Oatis Kendall, burned out by the year 1931, a writer of great potentialities.”

“Not as great as yours,” I said, quickly.

“Well, just wait. We were boys together, John Oatis and I, born where the shade of an oak tree touched my house in the morning and his house at night, swam every creek in the world together, got sick on sour apples and cigarettes together, saw the same lights in the same blond hair of the same young girl together, and in our late teens went out to kick Fate in the stomach and get beat on the head together.

We both did fair, and then I better and still better as the years ran. If his first book got one good notice, mine got six, if I got one bad notice, he got a dozen. We were like two friends on a train which the public has uncoupled. There went John Oatis on the caboose, left behind, crying out, ‘Save me! You’re leaving me in Tank Town, Ohio; we’re on the same track!’

And the conductor saying, ‘Yes, but not the same train!’ And myself yelling, ‘I believe in you, John, be of good heart, I’ll come back for you!’

And the caboose dwindling behind with its red and green lamps like cherry and lime pops shining in the dark and we yelling our friendship to each other: 'John, old man!' 'Dudley, old pal!' while John Oatis went out on a dark siding behind a tin baling-shed at midnight and my engine, with all the flag-wavers and brass bands, boiled on toward dawn."

Dudley Stone paused and noticed my look of general confusion.

"All this to lead up to my murder," he said. "For it was John Oatis Kendall who, in 1930, traded a few old clothes and some remaindered copies of his books for a gun and came out to this house and this room."

"He really meant to kill you?"

"Meant to, hell! He did! Bang! Have some more wine? That's better."

A strawberry shortcake was set upon the table by Mrs. Stone, while he enjoyed my gibbering suspense. Stone sliced it into three huge chunks and served it around, fixing me with his kindly approximation of the Wedding Guest's eye.

"There he sat, John Oatis, in that chair where you sit now. Behind him, outside, in the smokehouse, seventeen hams; in our wine cellars, five hundred bottles of the best; beyond the window open country, the elegant sea in full lace; overhead a moon like a dish of cool cream, everywhere the full panoply of spring, and Lena across the table, too, a willow tree in the wind, laughing at everything I said or did not choose to say, both of us thirty, mind you, thirty years old, life our magnificent carousel, our fingers playing full chords, my books selling well, fan mail pouring upon us in crisp white founts, horses in the stables for moonlight rides to coves where either we or the sea might whisper all we wished in the night.

And John Oatis seated there where you sit now, quietly taking the little blue gun from his pocket."

“I laughed, thinking it was a cigar lighter of some sort,” said his wife.
“But John Oatis said quite seriously: ‘I’m going to kill you, Mr. Stone.’”
“What did you do?”

“Do? I sat there, stunned, riven; I heard a terrible slam! the coffin lid in my face! I heard coal down a black chute; dirt on my buried door. They say all your past hurtles by at such times. Nonsense. The future does. You see your face a bloody porridge. You sit there until your fumbling mouth can say, ‘But why, John, what have I done to you?’

“‘Done!’ he cried.

“And his eye skimmed along the vast bookshelf and the handsome brigade of books drawn stiffly to attention there with my name on each blazing like a panther’s eye in the Moroccan blackness. ‘Done!’ he cried, mortally. And his hand itched the revolver in a sweat. ‘Now, John,’ I cautioned. ‘What do you want?’

“‘One thing more than anything else in the world,’ he said, ‘to kill you and be famous. Get my name in headlines. Be famous as you are famous. Be known for a lifetime and beyond as the man who killed Dudley Stone!’

“‘You can’t mean that!’

“‘I do. I’ll be very famous. Far more famous than I am today, in your shadow. Oh, listen here, no one in the world knows how to hate like a writer does. God, how I love your work and God, how I hate you because you write so well. Amazing ambivalence. But I can’t take it anymore, not being able to write as you do, so I’ll take my fame the easy way. I’ll cut you off before you reach your prime. They say your next book will be your very finest, your most brilliant!’

“‘They exaggerate.’

“‘My guess is they’re right!’ he said.

“I looked beyond him to Lena who sat in her chair, frightened, but not frightened enough to scream or run and spoil the scene so it might end inadvertently.

“‘Calm,’ I said. ‘Calmness. Sit there, John. I ask only one minute. Then pull the trigger.’

“‘No!’ Lena whispered.

“‘Calmness,’ I said to her, to myself, to John Oatis.

“I gazed out the open windows, I felt the wind, I thought of the wine in the cellar, the coves at the beach, the sea, the night moon like a disc of menthol cooling the summer heavens, drawing clouds of flaming salt, the stars, after it in a wheel toward morning. I thought of myself only thirty, Lena thirty, our whole lives ahead. I thought of all the flesh of life hung high and waiting for me to really start banqueting!

I had never climbed a mountain, I had never sailed an ocean, I had never run for mayor, I had never dived for pearls, I had never owned a telescope, I had never acted on a stage or built a house or read all the classics I had so wished to read. All the actions waiting to be done!

“So in that almost instantaneous sixty seconds, I thought at last of my career. The books I had written, the books I was writing, the books I intended to write. The reviews, the sales, our huge balance in the bank. And, believe or disbelieve me, for the first time in my life I got free of it all.

I became, in one moment, a critic. I cleared the scales. On one hand I put all the boats I hadn’t taken, the flowers I hadn’t planted, the children I hadn’t raised, all the hills I hadn’t looked at, with Lena there, goddess of the harvest.

In the middle I put John Oatis Kendall with his gun—the upright that held the balances. And on the empty scale a dozen books. I made some minor adjustments. The sixty opposite I laid my pen, my ink, my empty paper, my seconds were ticking by. The sweet night wind blew across

the table. It touched a curl of hair on Lena's neck, oh Lord, how softly, softly it touched . . .

"The gun pointed at me. I have seen the moon craters in photographs, and that hole in space called the Great Coal Sack Nebula, but neither was as big, take my word, as the mouth of that gun across the room from me.

"John,' I said at last, 'do you hate me that much? Because I've been lucky and you not?'

"Yes, damn it!' he cried.

"It was almost funny he should envy me. I was not that much better a writer than he. A flick of the wrist made the difference.

"John,' I said quietly to him, 'if you want me dead, I'll be dead. Would you like for me to never write again?'

"I'd like nothing better!' he cried. 'Get ready!' He aimed at my heart!

"All right,' I said, 'I'll never write again.'

"What?' he said.

"We're old old friends, we've never lied to each other, have we? Then take my word, from this night on I'll never put pen to paper.'

"Oh God,' he said, and laughed with contempt and disbelief.

"There,' I said, nodding my head at the desk near him, 'are the only original copies of the two books I've been working on for the last three years. I'll burn one in front of you now. The other you yourself may throw in the sea.

Clean out the house, take everything faintly resembling literature, burn my published books, too. Here.' I got up. He could have shot me then, but I had him fascinated. I tossed one manuscript on the hearth and touched a match to it.

“No!” Lena said. I turned. ‘I know what I’m doing,’ I said. She began to cry. John Oatis Kendall simply stared at me, bewitched. I brought him the other unpublished manuscript. ‘Here,’ I said, tucking it under his right shoe so his foot was a paper weight. I went back and sat down. The wind was blowing and the night was warm and Lena was white as apple-blossoms there across the table.

“I said, ‘From this day forward I will not write ever again.’
“At last John Oatis managed to say, ‘How can you do this?’

“To make everyone happy,’ I said. ‘To make you happy because we’ll be friends again, eventually. To make Lena happy because I’ll be just her husband again and no agent’s performing seal. And myself happy because I’d rather be a live man than a dead author. A dying man will do anything, John. Now take my last novel and get along with you.’

“We sat there, the three of us, just as we three are sitting tonight. There was a smell of lemons and limes and camellias. The ocean roared on the stony coastland below; God, what a lovely moonlit sound. And at last, picking up the manuscripts, John Oatis took them, like my body, out of the room.

He paused at the door and said, ‘I believe you.’ And then he was gone. I heard him drive away. I put Lena to bed. That was one of the few nights in my life I ever walked down by the shore, but walk I did, taking deep breaths and feeling my arms and legs and my face with my hands, crying like a child, walking and wading in the surf to feel the cold salt water foaming about me in a million suds.”

Dudley Stone paused. Time had made a stop in the room. Time was in another year, the three of us sitting there, enchanted with his telling of the murder.

“And did he destroy your last novel?” I asked.

Dudley Stone nodded. “A week later one of the pages drifted up on the shore. He must have thrown them over the cliff, a thousand pages, I see

it in my mind's eye, a flock of white sea-gulls it might seem, flying down to the water and going out with the tide at four in the black morning.

Lena ran up the beach with that single page in her hand, crying, 'Look, look!' And when I saw what she handed me, I tossed it back in the ocean."

"Don't tell me you honored your promise!"

Dudley Stone looked at me steadily. "What would you have done in a similar position? Look at it this way: John Oatis did me a favor. He didn't kill me. He didn't shoot me. He took my word. He honored my word. He let me live.

He let me go on eating and sleeping and breathing. Quite suddenly he had broadened my horizons. I was so grateful that standing on the beach hip-deep in water that night, I cried. I was grateful. Do you really understand that word? Grateful he had let me live when he had had it in his hand to annihilate me forever."

Mrs. Stone rose up, the dinner was ended. She cleared the dishes, we lit cigars; and Dudley Stone strolled me over to his office-at-home, a rolltop desk, its jaws propped wide with parcels and papers and ink bottles, a typewriter, documents, ledgers, indexes.

"It was all rolling to a boil in me. John Oatis simply spooned the froth off the top so I could see the brew. It was very clear," said Dudley Stone. "Writing was always so much mustard and gallweed to me; fidgeting words on paper, experiencing vast depressions of heart and soul. Watching the greedy critics graph me up, chart me down, slice me like sausage, eat me at midnight breakfasts. Work of the worst sort. I was ready to fling the pack. My trigger was set. Boom! There was John Oatis! Look here."

He rummaged in the desk and brought forth handbills and posters. "I had been writing about living. Now I wanted to live. Do things instead

of tell about things. I ran for the board of education. I won. I ran for alderman. I won. I ran for mayor. I won! Sheriff! Town librarian!

Sewage disposal official. I shook a lot of hands, saw a lot of life, did a lot of things. We've lived every way there is to live, with our eyes and noses and mouths, with our ears and hands.

We've climbed hills and painted pictures, there are some on the wall! We've been three times around the world! I even delivered our baby son, unexpectedly. He's grown and married now—lives in New York! We've done and done again." Stone paused and smiled. "Come on out in the yard; we've set up a telescope, would you like to see the rings of Saturn?"

We stood in the yard, and the wind blew from a thousand miles at sea and while we were standing there, looking at the stars through the telescope, Mrs. Stone went down into the midnight cellar after a rare Spanish wine.

It was noon the next day when we reached the lonely station after a hurricane trip across the jouncing meadows from the sea. Mr. Dudley Stone let the car have its head, while he talked to me, laughing, smiling, pointing to this or that outcrop of Neolithic stone, this or that wild flower, falling silent again only as we parked and waited for the train to come and take me away.

"I suppose," he said, looking at the sky, "you think I'm quite insane."
"No, I'd never say that."

"Well," said Dudley Stone, "John Oatis Kendall did me one other favor."
"What was that?"

Stone hitched around conversationally in the patched leather seat.

"He helped me get out when the going was good. Deep down inside I must have guessed that my literary success was something that would

melt when they turned off the cooling system. My subconscious had a pretty fair picture of my future.

I knew what none of my critics knew, that I was headed nowhere but down. The two books John Oatis destroyed were very bad. They would have killed me deader than Oatis possibly could.

So he helped me decide, unwittingly, what I might not have had the courage to decide myself, to bow gracefully out while the cotillion was still on, while the Chinese lanterns still cast flattering pink lights on my Harvard complexion.

I had seen too many writers up, down, and out, hurt, unhappy, suicidal. The combination of circumstance, coincidence, subconscious knowledge, relief, and gratitude to John Oatis Kendall to just be alive, were fortuitous, to say the least.”

We sat in the warm sunlight another minute.

“And then I had the pleasure of seeing myself compared to all the greats when I announced my departure from the literary scene. Few authors in recent history have bowed out to such publicity. It was a lovely funeral.

I looked, as they say, natural. And the echoes lingered. ‘His next book!’ the critics cried, ‘would have been it! A masterpiece!’ I had them panting, waiting. Little did they know.

Even now, a quarter-century later, my readers who were college boys then, make sooty excursions on drafty kerosene-stinking shortline trains to solve the mystery of why I’ve made them wait so long for my ‘masterpiece.’

And thanks to John Oatis Kendall I still have a little reputation; it has receded slowly, painlessly. The next year I might have died by my own writing hand. How much better to cut your own caboose off the train, before others do it for you.

“My friendship with John Oatis Kendall? It came back. It took time, of course. But he was out here to see me in 1947; it was a nice day, all around, like old times. And now he’s dead and at last I’ve told someone everything.

What will you tell your friends in the city? They won’t believe a word of this. But it is true, I swear it, as I sit here and breathe God’s good air and look at the calluses on my hands and begin to resemble the faded handbills I used when I ran for county treasurer.”

We stood on the station platform.

“Good-by, and thanks for coming and opening your ears and letting my world crash in on you. God bless to all your curious friends. Here comes the train! I’ve got to run; Lena and I are going to a Red Cross drive down the coast this afternoon! Good-by!”

I watched the dead man stomp and leap across the platform, felt the plankings shudder, saw him jump into his Model-T, heard it lurch under his bulk, saw him bang the floor-boards with a big foot, idle the motor, roar it, turn, smile, wave to me, and then roar off and away toward that suddenly brilliant town called Obscurity by a dazzling seashore called The Past.

The End