

Virgin Resusitas, Ray Bradbury

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She sounded crazy with joy on the phone. I had to calm her down.

"Helen," I said, "take it easy. What's going on?"

"The greatest news. You must come over, now, right now."

"This is Thursday, Helen. I don't usually see you on Thursdays. Tuesdays were always it."

"It can't wait, it's too wonderful."

"Can't you tell me over the phone?"

"It's too personal. I hate saying personal things on the phone. Are you that busy?"

"No, I just finished up some letters."

"Well then, come and celebrate with me."

"This had better be good," I said.

"Wait till you hear. Run."

I hung up slowly and walked slowly to put on my coat and reach for my courage. There was a feeling of doom waiting outside my door. I plowed through it, made it to my car, and drove through a self-imposed silence, with an occasional curse, to Helen's apartment across town. I hesitated at knocking on her door, but it sprang open, surprising me. The look on Helen's face was so wild I thought she had come off her hinges.

"Don't just stand there," she cried. "Come in."

"It's not Tuesday, Helen."

"And never will be again!" she laughed.

My stomach turned to lead. I let her pull me by the elbow, lead me in, sit me down, then she whirled through the room finding wine and filling glasses. She held one out to me. I only stared at it.

"Drink," she said.

"I have a feeling it won't do any good."

"Look at me!! I'm drinking! It's a celebration!"

"Every time you've ever used that word, part of the continent falls off into space. Here goes. What am I celebrating?"

I sipped and she touched my glass, indicating I should finish it so it could be refilled.

"Sit down, Helen. You make me nervous standing there."

"Well." She finished her glass and refilled both and sat down with a great exhalation of joy. "You'll never guess."

"I'm trying hard not to."

"Hold on to your hat. I've joined the Church."

"You—what church?" I stammered.

"Good grief! There's only one!"

"You have a lot of Mormon friends, and a few Lutherans on the side ... "

"My God," she cried. "Catholic, of course."

"Since when have you liked Catholics? I thought you were raised in an Orange family, family from Cork, laughed at the Pope!"

"Silly. That was then, this is now. I am certified."

"Give me that bottle." I downed my second wine and refilled and shook my head. "Now, give me that again. Slowly."

"I've just come from Father Reilly's down the street."

"who—?"

"He's the head priest at St. Ignatius. He's been preparing me, you know, instruction, the last month or so."

I fell back in my chair and peered into my empty glass. "Is that why I didn't see you last week?"

She nodded vigorously, beaming.

"Or the week before or the week before that?"

Again a wild nodding agreement, plus a burst of laughter.

"This Father Kelly—"

"Reilly."

"Reilly, Father. Where did you meet him?"

"I didn't exactly meet him." She glanced at the ceiling. I looked up to see what was there. She saw me looking and glanced back down.

"Well, bumped into him, then," I inquired.

"I—well, hell. I made an appointment."

"A fallen-away-long-time-ago Cork-energized Baptistmaid?"

"Don't get in an uproar."

"This is not an uproar. It's a former lover trying to comprehend ... "

"You're not a former lover!"

She reached out to touch my shoulder. I looked at her hand and it fell away.

"What am I, then? A almost former?"

"Don't say that."

"Maybe I should let you say it. I can see it in your mouth."

She licked her lips as if to erase the look.

"How long ago did you meet, bump, make an appointment with Reilly?"

"Father Reilly. I dunno."

"Yes, you do. An appointment like that is a day that will live in infamy, or that's how I see it."

"Don't jump to conclusions."

"No jumps. Just hopping mad. Or will be if you don't come clean."

"Is this supposed to be my second confession of the day?" She blinked.

"My God," I said, feeling an invisible stomach punch. "So that's it! You came plunging out of the confessional an hour ago and the first person you called with the lunatic news—"

"I didn't plunge out!"

"No, I suppose not. How long were you cooped up in there?"

"Not long."

"How long?"

"Half an hour. An hour."

"Is Reilly, Father Reilly taking a nap now? He must. How many dozen years of sin did you unload? Did he slip a word in edgewise? Was God mentioned?"

"Don't joke."

"Did that sound like a joke? So you trapped him for an hour, did you? I bet he's chugalugging the altar wine right now."

"Stop it!" she cried, and there were tears in her eyes. "I call you with good news and you spoil it."

"How long ago did you make this appointment with Reilly, Father, that is? Your first appointment, for instruction. It must take weeks or months. He does most of the talking, right, at the start?"

"Most."

"I'd just like to know the date is all. Is that asking too much?"

"January fifteenth, a Tuesday. Four o'clock."

I figured swiftly, sending my mind back. "Ah, yes," I said, and closed my eyes.

"Ah, yes, what?" She leaned forward.

"That was the last Tuesday, the final time you asked me to marry you."

"Was it?"

"Asked me to leave my wife and kids and marry you, yes."

"I don't recall."

"Yes, you do. And you recall my answer. No. Just like the dozen other times. No. So you picked up the phone and called Reilly."

"It wasn't all that quick."

"No? Did you wait half an hour, forty-five minutes?"

She lowered her eyes. "An hour, maybe two."

"Let's say an hour and a half, split the difference, and he had the time and you went over. A glad hand for the Baptist. Jesus, Mary, and Moses. Give me that."

I grabbed the wine back and did away with my third glass.

"Shoot," I said, looking up at her.

"That's all," she said, simply.

"You mean you brought me all the way over here just to tell me you are a practicing Catholic and have unloaded fifteen years of accumulated guilt?"

"Well—"

"I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop."

"Shoe?"

"That glass slipper I slipped on your foot three years back, the one that fit so perfectly. When it drops it'll break. I'll be on my feet till midnight picking up the pieces."

"You're not going to cry, are you?" She leaned forward, peering into my face.

"Yes, no. I haven't decided. If I did, would you put me over your shoulder, like you always do, and burp me? You always did that and made me well. Now what?"

"You said it all."

"How come I thought I was waiting for you to say it? Say it."

"The priest said—"

"I don't want to hear what the priest said. Don't blame him. What do you say?"

"The priest said," she went on, as if not hearing me, "since I am now a member of his flock, that from now on I mustn't have anything to do with married men."

"What about unmarried men, what did he say about those?"

"We only talked 'married.' "

"Now we've almost got it. What you are saying is that ... " I figured swiftly, counting back. "Is that the Tuesday before the Tuesday before last was our last tossing-the-blanket pillow fight?"

"I guess so," she said, miserably.

"Youguessso?"

"Yes," she said.

"And I'm not to see you again?"

"We can have lunch—"

"Lunch, after all those midnight banquets and delicatessen-appetite-inducing brunches and made-in-heaven snacks?"

"Don't exaggerate."

"Exaggerate? Hell, I've lived inside a tornado for three incredible years and never touched ground. There wasn't a hair of my body that didn't throw sparks if you touched me. I no sooner got out your door with the sun going down every Tuesday than I wanted to charge back in and rip the paper off the walls, crying your name. Exaggerate? Exaggerate! Call the madhouse. Rent me a room!"

"You'll get over it," she said, lamely.

"Around about next July, maybe August. By Halloween I'll be a basket case ... So from now on, Helen, you'll be seeing this Reilly, this father, this priest?"

"I don't like you putting it that way."

"He'll be instructing you every Tuesday afternoon, right as rain, on the nose? Well, will he or won't he?"

"Yes."

"My God!" I got up and walked around, talking to the walls. "What a plot for a book, a movie, a TV sitcom. Woman, lacking courage, no guts, figures amazingly clever way to ditch her boyfriend. Can't just say, Out, go, be gone. No. Can't say, It's over, it was nice but it's over. No, sir. So

she takes instruction and gets religion and uses the religion to call a halt and regain her virginity."

"That's not the way it was."

"You mean to say you just happened to get religion and once you were inoculated it suddenly struck you to call the Goodwill to come get me?"

"I never—"

"Yes, you did. And it's a perfect out. There's no way around it. I'm trapped. My hands are tied. If I forced you to love me now, you'd be sinning against Reilly's good advice. Lord, what a situation!" I sat down again. "Did you mention my name?"

"Not your name, no ... "

"But you did talk about me, right? Hours and hours?"

"Ten minutes, maybe fifteen."

"How I was good at this and that and you couldn't bear to live without me?"

"I'm living without you now and free as a bird!"

"I can tell by that fake laugh."

"It's not fake. You just don't want to hear it."

"Continue."

"What?"

"Go on with your grocery list."

"That's all."

She laced and unlaced her fingers.

"Well, one other thing ... "

"What?"

She took out a tissue and blew her nose.

"Every time we made love, it hurt."

"What?" I cried, stunned.

"It did," she said, not looking at me. "From the start. Always."

"You mean to say," I gasped, "that every time we took a trip to the moon on gossamer wings, it was painful?"

"Yes."

"And all those shouts and cries of joy were cover-ups for your discomfort?" "Yes."

"All those years, all those hours, why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't want to make you unhappy."

"Good God!" I cried.

And then, "I don't believe you."

"It's true."

"I don't believe you," I said, fighting to control my breath. "It was too wonderful, it was too great, it was—no, no, you couldn't have lied each time, every time." I stopped and stared at her. "You're making this up to tie it in with this Father Reilly thing. That's it, isn't it?"

"Honest to God—"

"Watch it. You're certified now! That's blasphemy!"

"Just 'honest' then. No lie."

I lapsed back into hot confusion.

There was a long silence.

"We could still have lunch," she said. "Someday."

"No thanks. I couldn't stand it. To see you and have to sit across from you and not touch, oh, Lord! Where's my hat? Was I wearing one?"

I put my hand on the doorknob.

"Where are you going?" she cried.

I shook my head, eyes shut. "I don't know. Yes, I do. To join the Unitarian Church!"

"What?"

"Unitarians. You know."

"But you can't do that!"

"Why?"

"Because—"

"Because?"

"They never mention God or Jesus. They're embarrassed if you talk about them."

"Right."

"Which means, when I see you wouldn't be able to mention God or Jesus."

"Right."

"You wouldn't join them!"

"No? You made the first move. Now it's mine. Checkmate."

I turned the doorknob and said:

"I'll call you next Tuesday, a last time. But if I do, don't ask me to marry you."

"Don't call," she said.

"Oh, love that I still dearly love," I said, "goodbye."

I went out and shut the door. Quietly.

The End