



West of October, Ray Bradbury

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The four cousins Peter, William, Philip, and Jack had lingered on after the Homecoming because a cloud of doom and melancholy and disbelief hung over Europe. There was no room in the dark House, so they were stashed almost upside-down in the barn, which shortly thereafter burned.

Like most of the Family they were not ordinary.

To say that most of them slept days and worked at odd occupations nights would fall short of commencement.

To remark that some of them could read minds, and some fly with lightnings to land with leaves, would be an understatement.

To add that some could not be seen in mirrors while others could be found in multitudinous shapes, sizes, and textures in the same glass would merely repeat gossip that veered into truth.

These boys resembled their uncles, aunts, cousins, and grandparents by the toadstool score and the mushroom dozen.

They were just about every color you could mix in one restless night. Some were young and others had been around since the Sphinx first sank its stone paws in tidal sands.

And all four were in love and in need for one special Family member. Cecy.

Cecy. She was the reason, the real reason, the central reason for the wild cousins to circle her and stay. For she was as seedpod full as a pomegranate. She was all the senses of all the creatures in the world. She was all the motion-picture houses and stage-play theaters and all the art galleries of all time.

Ask her to yank your soul like an aching tooth and shoot it into clouds to cool your spirit, and yanked you were, drawn high to drift in the mists.

Ask her to seize that same soul and bind it in the flesh of a tree, and you awoke the next morning with birds singing in your green head.

Ask to be pure rain and you fell on everything. Ask to be the moon and suddenly you looked down to see your pale light painting lost towns the color of tombstones and spectral ghosts.

Cecy. Who extracted your soul and pulled forth your impacted wisdom, and could transfer it to animal, vegetable, or mineral; name your poison.

No wonder the cousins lingered.

And along about sunset, before the dreadful fire, they climbed to the attic to stir her bed of Egyptian sands with their breath.

"Well," said Cecy, eyes shut, a smile playing about her mouth. "What would your pleasure be?"

"I" said Peter.

"Maybe" said William and Philip.

"Could you" said Jack.

"Take you on a visit to the local insane asylum," guessed Cecy, "to peek inside people's corkscrew heads?"

"Yes!"

"Done!" said Cecy. "Go lie on your cots in the barn. Over, up, and out!" Like corks, their souls popped. Like birds, they flew. Like bright needles, they shot in various crazed asylum ears.

"Ah!" they cried in delight.

While they were gone, the barn burned.

In all the shouting and confusion, the running for water, the general ramshackle hysteria, everyone forgot who was in the barn or what the high-flying cousins and Cecy, asleep, might be up to.

So deep in her rushing dreams was she, that she felt neither the flames, nor the dread moment when the walls fell and four human-shaped torches self-destroyed. A clap of thunder banged across country, shook

the skies, knocked the wind-blown essences of cousins through mill-fans, while Cecy, with a gasp, sat straight up and gave one shriek that shot the cousins home. All four, at the moment of concussion, had been in various asylum bins, prying trap-door skulls to peek in at maelstroms of confetti the colors of madness, the dark rainbows of nightmare.

"What happened?" cried Jack from Cecy's mouth.

"What!" said Philip, moving her lips.

"My god." William stared from her eyes.

"The barn burned," said Peter. "We're lost!"

The Family, soot-faced in the smoking yard, turned like a traveling minstrel's funeral and stared up at Cecy in shock.

"Cecy?" called Mother, wildly. "Is someone with you?"

"Me, Peter!" shouted Peter from her lips.

"Philip!"

"William!"

"Jack!"

The souls counted off from Cecy's tongue.

The Family waited.

Then, as one, the four young men's voices asked the final, most dreadful question:

"Didn't you save just one body?"

The Family sank an inch into the earth, burdened with a reply they could not give.

"But" Cecy held on to her elbows, touched her own chin, her mouth, her brow, inside which four live ghosts wrestled for room. "But what'll I do with them?" Her eyes searched all those faces below in the yard.

"My cousins can't stay! They can't stand around in my head!"

What she cried after that, or what the cousins babbled, crammed like pebbles under her tongue, or what the Family said, running like burned chickens in the yard, was lost.

With Judgment Day thunders, the rest of the barn fell.

With a vast whisper the ashes blew away in an October wind that leaned this way and that on the attic roof.

"It seems to me," said Father.

"Not seems, but is!" said Cecy, eyes shut.

"We must farm the cousins out. Find temporary hospices until such time as we can cull new bodies"

"The quicker the better," said four voices from Cecy's mouth, now high, now low, now two gradations between.

Father continued in darkness. "There must be someone in the Family with a small room in the backside of their cerebellum! Volunteers!"

The Family sucked in an icy breath and stayed silent. Great Grandmere, far above in her own attic place, suddenly whispered: "I hereby solicit, name, and nominate the oldest of the old!"

As if their heads were on a single string, everyone turned to blink at a far corner where their ancient Nile River Grandpere leaned like a dry bundle of two-millennia-before-Christ wheat.

The Nile ancestor husked, "No!"

"Yes!" Grandmere shut her sand-slit eyes, folded her brittle arms over her tomb-painted bosom. "You have all the time in the world."

"Again, no!" The mortuary wheat rustled.

"This," Grandmere murmured, "is the Family, all strange-fine. We walk nights, fly winds and airs, wander storms, read minds, work magic, live forever or a thousand years, whichever. In sum, we're Family, to be leaned on, turned to, when"

"No, no!"

"Hush." One eye as large as the Star of India opened, burned, dimmed, died. "It's not proper, four wild men in a slim girl's head. And there's much you can teach the cousins. You thrived long before Napoleon walked in and ran out of Russia, or Ben Franklin died of pox. Fine if the boys' souls were lodged in your ear some while. It might straighten their spines. Would you deny this?"

The ancient ancestor from the White and Blue Niles gave only the faintest percussion of harvest wreaths.

"Well, then," said the frail remembrance of Pharaoh's daughter.

"Children of the night, did you hear!?"

"We heard!" cried the ghosts from Cecy's mouth.

"Move!" said the four-thousand-year-old mummification.

"We move!" said the four.

And since no one had bothered to say which cousin went first, there was a surge of phantom tissue, a tide-drift of storm on the unseen wind.

Four different expressions lit Grandpere's harvest ancestor's face. Four earthquakes shook his brittle frame. Four smiles ran scales along his yellow piano teeth. Before he could protest, at four different gaits and speeds, he was shambled from the house, across the lawn, and down the lost railroad tracks toward town, a mob of laughter in his cereal throat.

The Family leaned from the porch, staring after the rushing parade of one.

Cecy, deep asleep again, gaped her mouth to free the echoes of the mob.

At noon the next day the big, dull-blue iron engine panted into the railroad station to find the Family restless on the platform, the old harvest pharaoh supported in their midst. They not so much walked but carried him to the day coach, which smelled of fresh varnish and hot plush. Along the way, the Nile traveler, eyes shut, uttered curses in many voices that everyone ignored.

They propped him like an ancient corn-shock in his seat, fastened a hat on his head like putting a new roof on an old building, and addressed his wrinkled face.

"Grandpere, sit up. Grandpere, are you in there? Get out of the way, cousins, let the old one speak."

"Here." His dry mouth twitched and whistled. "And suffering their sins and misery! Oh, damn, damn!"

"No!"

"Lies!"

"We did nothing!" cried the voices from one side, then the other, of his mouth. "Cease!"

"Silence!" Father seized the ancient chin and focused the inner bones with a shake. "West of October is Sojourn, Missouri, not a long trip. We have kin there. Uncles, aunts, some with, some without children. Since Cecy's mind can only travel a few miles, you must cargo-transit these obstreperous cousins yet farther and stash them with Family flesh and minds."

"But if you can't distribute the fools," he added, "bring them back alive."

"Goodbye!" said four voices from the ancient harvest bundle.

"Goodbye Grandpere, Peter, William, Philip, Jack!"

"Forget me not!" a young woman's voice cried.

"Cecy!" all shouted. "Farewell!"

The train chanted away, west of October.

The train rounded a long curve. The Nile ancestor leaned and creaked.

"Well," whispered Peter, "here we are."

"Yes." William went on: "Here we are."

The train whistled.

"Tired," said Jack.

"You're tired!" the ancient one rasped.

"Stuffy in here," said Philip.

"Expect that! The ancient one is four thousand years old, right, old one? Your skull is a tomb."

"Cease!" The old one gave his own brow a thump. A panic of birds knocked in his head. "Cease!"

"There," whispered Cecy, quieting the panic. "I've slept well and I'll come for part of the trip, Grandpere, to teach you how to hold, stay, and keep the resident crows and vultures in your cage."

"Crows! Vultures!" the cousins protested.

"Silence," said Cecy, tamping the cousins like tobacco in an ancient uncleaned pipe. Far away, her body lay on her Egyptian sands, but her mind circled, touched, pushed, enchanted, kept. "Enjoy. Look!"
The cousins looked.

And indeed, wandering in the upper keeps of the ancient tomb was like surviving in a dim sarcophagus in which memories, transparent wings folded, lay piled in ribboned bundles, in files, packets, shrouded figures, strewn shadows. Here and there, a special bright memory, like a single ray of amber light, struck in upon and shaped a golden hour, a summer day. There was a smell of worn leather and burnt horsehair and the faintest scent of uric acid from the jaundiced stones that ached about them as they jostled half-seen elbows.

"Look," murmured the cousins. "Oh, yes! Yes!"

For now, quietly indeed, they were peering through the dusty panes of the ancient's eyes, viewing the great hellfire train that bore them and the green-turning-to-brown autumn world streaming, passing as before a house with cobwebbed windows. When they worked the old one's mouth it was like ringing a lead clapper in a rusted bell. The sounds of the world wandered in through his hollow ears, static on a badly tuned radio.

"Still," Peter said, "it's better than having no body at all."

The train banged across a bridge in thunders.

"Think I'll look around," said Peter.

The ancient felt his limbs stir.

"Stay! Lie back! Sit!"

The old one crammed his eyes tight.

"Open up! Let's see!"

His eyeballs swiveled.

"Here comes a lovely girl. Quick!"

"Most beautiful girl in the world!"

The mummy couldn't help but peel one eye.

"Ah!" said everyone. "Right!"

The young woman curved, leaning as the train pushed or pulled her; as pretty as something you won at a carnival by knocking over milk bottles.

"No!" The old one slammed his lids.

"Open wide!"

His eyeballs churned.

"Let go!" he shouted. "Stop!"

The young woman lurched as if to fall on all of them.

"Stop!" cried the old, old person. "Cecy's with us, all innocence."

"Innocence!" The inner attic roared.

"Grandpere," said Cecy softly. "With all my nigh excursions, my traveling, I am not"

"Innocent!" the four cousins shouted.

"Look here!" protested Grandpere.

"You look," whispered Cecy. "I have sewn my way through bedroom windows on a thousand summer nights. I have lain in cool snowbeds of white pillows and swum unclothed in rivers on August noons to lie on riverbeds for birds to see"

"I will not listen!"

"Yes." Cecy's voice wandered in meadows of remembrance. "I have lingered in a girl's summer face to look out at a young man, and I have been in that same man, the same instant, breathing fire at that forever summer girl. I have nested in mating mice, circling lovebirds, bleeding-heart doves, and hid in butterflies fused on a flower."

"Damn!"

"I've run in sleighs on December midnights when snow fell and smoke plumed out of the horses' pink nostrils and there were fur blankets piled high with six young people hidden warm, delving, wishing, finding"

"Cease!"

"Brava!" yelled the cousins.

"and I have lodged in an edifice of bone and flesh the most beautiful woman in the world ... "

Grandpere was stunned.

For now it was as if snow fell to quiet him. He felt a stir of flowers about his brow, and a blowing of July morning wind about his ears, and all through his limbs a burgeoning of warmth, a growth of bosom about his ancient flat chest, a fire struck to bloom in the pit of his stomach. Now, as she talked, his lips softened and colored and knew poetry and might have let it pour forth in incredible rains, and his worn and tomb-dust fingers tumbled in his lap and changed to cream and milk and melting apple-snow. He stared down at them, frozen, and clenched his fists.

"No! Give back my hands! Cleanse my mouth!"

"Enough," said an inner voice, Philip.

"We're wasting time," said Peter.

"Let's greet the young lady," said Jack.

"Aye!" said the Mormon Tabernacle Choir from a single throat.

Grandpere was yanked to his feet by unseen wires.

"Let me be!" he cried, and vised his eyes, his skull, his ribs, an incredible strange bed that sank to smother the cousins. "There! Stop!"

The cousins ricocheted in the dark.

"Help! Light! Cecy!"

"Here," said Cecy.

The old one felt himself twitched, tickled, behind his ears, his spine. His lungs filled with feathers, his nose sneezed soot.

"Will, his left leg, move! Peter, the right, step! Philip, right arm. Jack, the left. Fling!"

"Double-time. Run!"

Grandpere lurched.

But he didn't lurch at the fine girl; he swayed and half collapsed away.

"Wait!" cried the Greek chorus. "She's back there! Someone trip him. Who has his legs? Will? Peter?"

Grandpere flung the vestibule door wide, fell out on the windy platform and was about to hurl himself full into a meadow of swiftly flashing sunflowers when:

"Statues!" said the chorus stuffed in his mouth.

And statue he became on the backside of the swiftly vanishing train. Spun about, Grandpere found himself back inside. As the train rocketed a curve, he sat on a young lady's hands.

"Excuse!" Grandpere leaped up.

"Excused." She rearranged her hands.

"No trouble, no, no!" The old, old creature collapsed on the seat across from her. "Hell! Bats, back in the belfry! Damn!"

The cousins melted the wax in his ears.

"Remember," he hissed behind his teeth, "while you're acting young in there, I'm Tut, fresh from the tomb out here."

"But" The chamber quartet fiddled his lids. "We'll make you young!"

They lit a fuse in his belly, a bomb in his chest.

"No!"

Grandpere yanked a cord. A trapdoor gaped. The cousins fell down into an endless maze of blazing remembrance: three-dimensional shapes as rich and warm as the girl across the aisle. The cousins fell.

"Watch out!"

"I'm lost!"

"Peter?"

"I'm somewhere in Wisconsin. How'd I get here?"

"I'm on a Hudson River boat. William?"

Far off, William called, "London. My god! Newspapers say the date's August twenty-second, 1800!"

"Cecy?! You did this!"

"No, me!"

Grandpere shouted everywhere, all about. "You're still in my ears, damn, but living my old times and places. Mind your heads!"

"Hold on!" said William. "Is this the Grand Canyon or your medulla oblongata?"

"Grand Canyon. Nineteen twenty-one."

"A woman!" cried Peter. "Here before me."

And indeed this woman was beautiful as the spring, two hundred years ago. Grandpere recalled no name. She had been someone passing with wild strawberries on a summer noon.

Peter reached for the fabulous ghost.

"Away!" shouted Grandpere.

And the girl's face exploded in the summer air and vanished down the road.

"Blast!" cried Peter.

His brothers rampaged, breaking the doors, lifting windows.

"My god! Look!" they shouted.

For Grandpere's memories lay side by side, neat as sardines, a million deep, a million wide, stashed by seconds, minutes, hours. Here a dark girl brushing her hair. There a blond girl running, or asleep. All trapped in honeycombs the color of their summer cheeks. Their smiles flashed. You could pluck them up, turn them round, send them off, call them back. Cry "Italy, 1797," and they danced through warm pavilions, or swam in firefly tides.

"Grandpere, does Grandmere know about these?"

"There are more!"

"Thousands!"

Grandpere flung back a tissue of remembrance. "Here!"

A thousand women wandered a labyrinth.

"Bravo, Grandpere!"

From ear to ear, he felt them rummage cities, alleys, rooms.

Until Jack seized one lone and lovely lady.

"Got you!"

She turned.

"Fool!" she whispered.

The lovely woman's flesh burned away. The chin grew gaunt, the cheeks hollow, the eyes sank.

"Grandmere, it's you!"

"Four thousand years ago," she murmured.

"Cecy!" Grandpere raged. "Stash Jack in a dog, a tree! Anywhere but my damn fool head!"

"Out, Jack!" commanded Cecy.

And Jack was out.

Left in a robin on a pole flashing by.

Grandmere stood withered in darkness. Grandpere's inward gaze touched to reclothe her younger flesh. New color filled her eyes, cheeks, and hair. He put her safely away in an orchard of trees in Alexandria when time was new.

Grandpere opened his eyes.

Sunlight blinded the remaining cousins.

The maiden still sat across the aisle.

The cousins jumped behind his gaze.

"Fools!" they said. "Why bother with old? New is now!"

"Yes," whispered Cecy. "Now! I'll tuck Grandpere's mind in her body and bring her dreams to hide in his head. He will sit ramrod straight. Inside him we'll all be acrobats, gymnasts, fiends! The conductor will pass, not guessing. Grandpere's head will fill with wild laughter, unclothed mobs, while his true mind will be trapped in that fine girl's brow. What fun on a train on a hot afternoon!"

"Yes!" everyone shouted.

"No." And Grandpere pulled forth two white tablets and swallowed.

"Stop!"

"Drat!" said Cecy. "It was such a fine, wicked plan."

"Goodnight, sleep well," said Grandpere. "And you" He gazed with gentle sleepiness at the maiden across the aisle. "You have just been saved from a fate, young lady, worse than four male cousins' deaths."

"Pardon?"

"Innocence, continue in thy innocence," murmured Grandpere, and fell asleep.

The train pulled into Sojourn, Missouri, at six. Only then was Jack allowed back from his exile in the head of that robin of a faraway tree. There were absolutely no relatives in Sojourn willing to put up with the rampant cousins, so Grandpere rode the train back to Illinois, the cousins ripe in him, like peach stones.

And there they stayed, each in a different territory of Grandpere's sun- or moonlit attic keep.

Peter took up residence in a remembrance of 1840 in Vienna with a crazed actress; William lived in the Lake Country with a flaxen-haired Swede of some indefinite years; while Jack shuttled from fleshpot to fleshpot Frisco, Berlin, Paris appearing, on occasion, as a wicked glitter in Grandpere's eyes. And Philip, all wise, locked himself deep in a library cell to con all the books that Grandpere loved.

But on some nights Grandpere edges over through the attic toward Grandmere, no four thousand, now fourteen, years old.

"You! At your age!" she shrieks.

And she flails and flails him until, laughing in five voices, Grandpere gives up, falls back, and pretends to sleep, alert with five kinds of alertness, ready for another try.

Perhaps in four thousand years.

The End