

Yes, We'll Gather at the River, Ray Bradbury

Yes, We'll Gather at the River

At one minute to nine he should have rolled the wooden Indian back into warm tobacco darkness and turned the key in the lock. But somehow he waited because there were so many lost men walking by in no special direction for no special reason.

A few of them wandered in to drift their gaze over the tribal cigars laid out in their neat brown boxes, then glanced up suddenly surprised to find where they were and said, evasively, "Evening, Charlie."

"So it is," said Charlie Moore.

Some of the men wandered off empty-handed, others moved on with a nickel cigar unlit in their mouths.

So it was nine thirty of a Thursday night before Charlie Moore finally touched the wooden Indian's elbow as if disturbing a friend and hating to bother. Gently he maneuvered the savage to where he became watchman of the night. In the shadows, the carved face stared raw and blind through the door.

"Well, Chief, what do you see?"

Charlie followed that silent gaze beyond to the highway that cut through the very center of their lives.

In locust hordes, cars roared up from Los Angeles. With irritation they slowed to thirty miles per hour here. They crept between some three dozen shops, stores, and old livery stables become gas stations, to the north rim of town. There the cars exploded back to eighty, racing like Furies on San Francisco, to teach it violence.

Charlie snorted softly.

A man passed, saw him standing with his silent wooden friend, said, "Last night, eh?" and was gone.

Last night.

There. Someone had dared use the words.

Charlie wheeled to switch off the lights, lock the door and, on the sidewalk, eyes down, freeze.

As if hypnotized, he felt his gaze rise again to the old highway which swept by with winds that smelled a billion years ago. Great bursts of headlight arrived, then cut away in departures of red taillight, like schools of small bright fish darting in the wake of sharks and blind-traveling whales. The lights sank away and were lost in the black hills.

Charlie broke his stare. He walked slowly on through his town as the clock over the Oddfellows Lodge struck the quarter hour and moved on toward ten and still he walked and was amazed and then not amazed any more to see how every shop was still open long after hours and in every door stood a man or woman transfixed even as he and his Indian brave had been transfixed by a talked-about and dreadful future suddenly become Here Now Tonight.

Fred Ferguson, the taxidermist, kin to the family of wild owls and panicked deer which stayed on forever in his window, spoke to the night air as Charlie passed:

"Hard to believe, ain't it?"

He wished no answer, for he went on, immediately:

"Keep thinking: just can't be. Tomorrow, the highway dead and us dead with it."

"Oh, it won't be that bad," said Charlie.

Ferguson gave him a shocked look. "Wait. Ain't you the one hollered two years ago, wanted to bomb the legislature, shoot the road contractors, steal the concrete mixers and earth-movers when they started the new highway three hundred yards west of here? What you mean, it won't be bad? It will, and you know it!"

"I know," said Charlie Moore, at last.

Ferguson brooded on the near distance.

"Three hundred little bitty yards. Not much, eh? But seeing as how our town is only a hundred yards wide, that puts us, give or take, about two hundred yards from the new super-road. Two hundred yards from people who need nuts, bolts, or house-paint.

Two hundred from jokers who barrel down from the mountains with deer or fresh shot alley-cats of all sorts and need the services of the only A-I taxidermist on the Coast. Two hundred yards from ladies who need aspirin—" He eyed the drugstore. "Haircuts." He watched the red-striped pole spin in its glass case down the street. "Strawberry sodas." He nodded at the malt shop. "You name it."

They named it all in silence, sliding their gaze along the stores, the shops, the arcades.

"Maybe it's not too late."

"Late, Charlie? Hell. Cement's mixed and poured and set. Come dawn they yank the roadblocks both ends of the new road. Governor might cut a ribbon from the first car. Then ... people might remember Oak Lane the first week, sure. The second week not so much. A month from now? We'll be a smear of old paint on their right running north, on their left running south, burning rubber. There's Oak Lane! Remember? Ghost town. Oops! It's gone."

Charlie let his heart beat two or three times.

"Fred ... what you going to do?"

"Stay on awhile. Stuff a few birds the local boys bring in. Then crank the old Tin Lizzie and drive that new superfreeway myself going nowhere, anywhere, and so long to you, Charlie Moore."

"Night, Fred. Hope you sleep."

"What, and miss welcoming in the New Year, middle of July ... ?"

Charlie walked and that voice faded behind and he came to the barbershop where three men, laid out, were being strenuously

barbered behind plate glass. The highway traffic slid over them in bright reflections. They looked like they were drowning under a stream of huge fireflies.

Charlie stepped in. Everyone glanced up.

"Anyone got any ideas?"

"Progress, Charlie," said Frank Mariano, combing and cutting, "is an idea can't be stopped with no other idea. Let's yank up the whole damn town, lock, stock, and tar barrel, carry it over, nail it down by that new road."

"We figured the cost last year. Four dozen stores at three thousand dollars average to haul them just three hundred yards west."

"So ends that master plan," muttered someone under a hot-steam towel, buried in inescapable fact.

"One good hurricane would do the job, carriage-free."

They all laughed quietly.

"We should all celebrate tonight," said the man under the hot towel. He sat up, revealing himself as Hank Summers, the groceryman. "Snort a few stiff drinks and wonder where the hell we'll all be this time next year."

"We didn't fight hard enough," said Charlie. "When it started, we didn't pitch in."

"Hell." Frank snipped a hair out of the inside of a fairly large ear, "when times move, not a day passes someone's not hurt. This month, this year, it's our turn. Next timewewant something, someone else gets stepped on, all in the name of Get Up and Go. Look, Charlie, go form a vigilantes. Mine that new road. But watch out. Just crossing the lanes to place the bomb, you're sure to be run down by a manure truck bound for Salinas."

More laughter, which faded quickly.

"Look," said Hank Summers, and everybody looked. He spoke to his own fly-specked image in the ancient mirror as if trying to sell his twin on a shared logic. "We lived here thirty years now, you, me, all of us. Won't kill us to move on. Good God, we're all root and a yard wide. Graduation. School of hard knocks is throwing us out the door with no never-mind's and no thank-you's. I'm ready. Charlie, areyou?"

"Me, now," said Frank Mariano. "Monday morning six a.m. I load my barbership in a trailer and shoot off after those customers, ninety miles an hour!"

There was a laugh sounded like the very last one of the day, so Charlie turned with one superb and mindless drift and was back on the street.

And still the shops stayed open, the lights stayed on, the doors stood wide, as if each owner was reluctant to go home, so long as that river out there was flowing and there was the great motion and glint and sound of people and metal and light in a tide they had grown so accustomed to it was hard to believe the river bottom would ever know a dry season.

Charlie lingered on, straying from shop to shop, sipping a chocolate Coke at the malted-milk counter, buying some stationery he couldn't use from the drugstore under the soft fluttering wood fan that whispered to itself in the ceiling.

He loitered like a common criminal, thieving sights. He paused in alleys where, Saturday afternoons, gypsy tie salesmen or kitchenware spielers laid out their suitcase worlds to con the pedestrians. Then, at last he reached the gas station where Pete Britz, deep in the oil pit, was mending the dumb brute underside of a dead and uncomplaining 1947 Ford.

At ten o'clock, as if by some secret but mutual consent, all the shops went dark, all the people walked home, Charlie Moore among them.

He caught up with Hank Summers, whose face was still shining pink from the shave he hadn't needed. They ambled in silence for a time past houses where it seemed the whole population was sitting out smoking or knitting, rocking in chairs or fanning themselves against a nonexistent hot spell.

Hank laughed suddenly at some private thought. A few paces on, he decided to make it public:

"Yes, we'll gather at the River, River, River.

Yes, we'll gather at the River

That flows by the Throne of God."

He half-sang it and Charlie nodded.

"First Baptist Church, when I was twelve."

"The Lord giveth and the Highway Commissioner taketh away," said Hank, drily. "Funny. Never thought how much a town is people. Doing things, that is. Under the hot towel back there, thought: what's this place to me? Shaved, I had the answer. Russ Newell banging a carburetor at the Night Owl Garage? Yep. Allie Mae Simpson ... "

He swallowed his voice in embarrassment.

Allie Mae Simpson ... Charlie took up the count in his own mind ... Allie Mae fixing wet curlicues: in old ladies' hair in the bay window of her Vogue Salon ... Doc Knight stacking pill bottles in the drug emporium cases ... hardware store laid out in the hot noon sun, Clint Simpson middle of it all, running his hands over, sorting out the million blinks and shines of brass and silver and gold, all the nails, hinges, knobs, all the saws, hammers, and snaked up copper wire and stacks of aluminum foil like the junk shaken free of a thousand boys' pockets in a thousand summers past—and then ...

... then there was his own place, warm dark, brown, comfortable, musky as the den of a tobacco smoking bear ... thick with the humidior smells of whole families of odd-sized cigars, imported cigarettes, snuffs just waiting to be exploded on the air ...

Take all that: away, thought Charlie, you got nothing. Buildings, sure. Anyone can raise a frame, paint a sign to say what might go on inside. But it was people that made the damn thingget. Hank surfaced in his own long thoughts.

"Guess right now I'm sad. Want to send everyone back to open their shops so I can see what they were up to. Why wasn't I looking closer, all these years? Hell, hell. What's got into you, Hank Summers. There's another Oak Lane on up the line or down the line and people there busy as they are here. Wherever I land, next time I'll look close, swear to God. Good-bye, Charlie."

"To hell with good-bye."

"All right, then, good night."

And Hank was gone and Charlie was home and Clara was waiting at the screen door with a glass of ice water.

"Sit out awhile?"

"Like everyone else? Why not?"

They sat in the dark on the porch in the chain-hung wooden swing and watched the highway flush and drain, flush and drain with arrivals of headlight and departures of angry red fire like the coals from an immense brazier scattered to the fields.

Charlie drank the water slowly and, drinking, thought: In the old days you couldn't see the roads die. You felt them gradually fade, yes, lying in bed nights, maybe your mind got hold of some hint, some nudge or commotion that warned you it was sinking away.

But it took years and years for any one road to give up its dusty ghost and another to stir alive. That's how things were, slow arriving and slow passing away. That's how things had always been.

But no more. Now, in a matter of hours.
He paused.

He touched in upon himself to find a new thing.

"I'm not mad any more."

"Good," said his wife.

They rocked awhile, two halves of a similar content.

"My God, I was stirred up there for awhile."

"I remember," she said.

"But now I figure, well ... " he drifted his voice, mostly to himself.

"Millions of cars come through every year. Like it or not, the road's just not big enough, we're holding up the world, that old road there and this old town.

The world says it's got to move. So now, on that new road, not one but two million will pass just a shotgun blast away, going where they got to go to get things done they say are important, doesn't matter if they're important or not, folksthinkthey are, and thinking makes the game.

If we'd really seen it coming, thought in on it from every side, we'd have taken a steam-driven sledge and just mashed the town flat and said, 'Drive through!' instead of making them lay the damn road over in that next clover patch.

This way, the town dies hard, strangled on a piece of butcher string instead of being dropped off a cliff. Well, well." He lit his pipe and blew great clouds of smoke in which to poke for past mistakes and present revelations. "Us being human, I guess we couldn't have done but as we did ... "

They heard the drugstore clock strike eleven and the Oddfellows Hall clock chime eleven thirty, and at twelve they lay in bed in the dark, each with a ceilingful of thoughts above them.

"Graduation."

"What?"

"Frank the barber said it and had it right. This whole week feels like the last days of school, years ago. I remember how I felt, how I was afraid, ready to cry, and how I promised myself to live every last moment right up to the time the diploma was in my hand, for God only knew what tomorrow might bring. Unemployment. Depression. War. And then...

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The End