

At The End Of The Ninth Year, Ray Bradbury

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"Well," said Sheila, chewing on her breakfast toast and examining her complexion, distorted in the side of the coffee urn, "here it is the last day of the last month of the ninth year."

Her husband, Thomas, glanced over the rampart of The Wall Street Journal saw nothing to fasten his regard, and sank back in place.

"What?"

"I said," said Sheila, "the ninth year's finished and you have a completely new wife. Or, to put it properly, the old wife's gone. So I don't think we're married anymore."

Thomas floored the Journal on his as-yet-untouched scrambled eggs, tilted his head this way and that, and said:

"Not married?"

"No, that was another time, another body, another me." She buttered more toast and munched on it philosophically.

"Hold on!" He took a stiff jolt of coffee. "Explain."

"Well, dear Thomas, don't you remember reading as children and later, that every nine years, I think it was nine, the body, churning like a gene-chromosome factory, did your entire person over, fingernails, spleen, ankles to elbows, belly, bum, and earlobes, molecule by molecule-

"Oh, get to it," he grumbled. "The point, wife, the point!"

"The point, dear Tom," she replied, finishing her toast, "is that with this breakfast I have replenished my soul and psyche, completed the reworking of my entire flesh, blood, and bones. This person seated across from you is not the woman you married-

"I have often said that!"

"Be serious."

"Are you?" he said.

"Let me finish. If the medical research is true, then at the end of nine years there is not an eyebrow, eyelash, pore, dimple, or skin follicle in this creature here at this celebratory breakfast that in any way is related to that old Sheila Tompkins married at eleven a.m. of a Saturday nine years ago this very hour. Two different women. One in bondage to a nice male creature whose jaw jumps out like a cash register when he scans the Journal. The other, now that it is one minute after the deadline hour, Born Free. So!"

She rose swiftly and prepared to flee.

"Wait!" He gave himself another jolt of coffee. "Where are you going?" Hallway to the door, she said, "Out. Perhaps away. And who knows: forever!"

"Born free? Hogwash. Come here! Sit down!"

She hesitated as he assumed his lion-tamer's voice. "Dammit. You owe me an explanation. Sit!"

She turned slowly. "For only as long as it takes to draw a picture."

"Draw it, then. Sit!"

She came to stare at her plate. "I seem to have eaten everything in sight."

He jumped up, ran over to the side table, rummaged more omelet, and banged it in front of her.

"There.! Speak with your mouth full."

She forked in the eggs. "You do see what I'm driving at, don't you, Tomasino?"

"Damnation! I thought you were happy!"

"Yes, but not incredibly happy."

"That's for maniacs on their honeymoons!"

"Yes, wasn't it?" she remembered.

"That was then, this is now. Well?"

"I could feel it happening all year. Lying in bed, I felt my skin prickle, my pores open like ten thousand tiny mouths, my perspiration run like

faucets, my heart race, my pulse sound in the oddest places, under my chin, my wrists, the backs of my knees, my ankles. I felt like a huge wax statue, melting. After midnight I was afraid to turn on the bathroom light and find a stranger gone mad in the mirror."

"All right, all right!" He stirred four sugars in his coffee and drank the slops from the saucer. "Sum it up!"

"Every hour of every night and then all day, I could feel it as if I were out in a storm being struck by hot August rain that washed away the old to find a brand-new me. Every drop of serum, every red and white corpuscle, every hot flash of nerve ending, rewired and restrung, new marrow, new hair for combing, new fingerprints even. Don't look at me that way. Perhaps no new fingerprints. But all the rest. See? Am I not a fresh-sculpted, fresh-painted work of God's creation?"

He searched her up and down with a razor glare.

"I hear Mad Carlotta maundering," he said. "I see a woman hyperventilated by a midlife frenzy. Why don't you just say it? Do you want a divorce?"

"Not necessarily."

"Not necessarily?" he shouted.

"I'll just simply . . . go away."

"Where will you go?"

"There must be some place," she said vaguely, stirring her omelet to make paths.

"Is there another man?" he said at last, holding his utensils with fists.

"Not quite yet.

"Thank God for small favors." He let a great breath gust out. "Now go to your room."

"Beg pardon?" She blinked.

"You'll not be allowed out for the rest of this week. Go to your room. No phone calls. No TV. No-"

She was on her feet. "You sound like my father in high school!"

"I'll be damned." He laughed quietly. "Yes! Upstairs now! No lunch for you, my girl. I'll put a plate by your door at suppertime. When you behave I'll give you your car keys. Meanwhile, march! Pull out your telephone plugs and hand over your CD player!"

"This is outrageous," she cried. "I'm a grown woman."

"Ingrown. No progress. Re-gress. If that damn theory's true, you didn't add on, just sank back nine years! Out you go! Up!"

She ran, pale-faced, to the entry stairs, wiping tears from her eyes.

As she was hallway up, he, putting his foot on the first step, pulled the napkin from his shirt and called quietly, "Wait ..."

She froze in place but did not look back down at him, waiting.

"Sheila," he said at last, tears running down his cheeks now.

"Yes," she whispered.

"I love you," he said.

"I know," she said. "But it doesn't help."

"Yes, it does. Listen."

She waited, hallway up to her room.

He rubbed his hand over his face as if trying to massage some truth out of it. His hand was almost frantic, searching for something hidden around his mouth or near his eyes.

Then it almost burst from him. "Sheila!"

"I'm supposed to go to my room," she said.

"Don't!"

"What, then?"

His face began to relax, his eyes to fix on a solution, as his hand rested on the banister leading up to where she stood with her back turned.

"If what you say is true-"

"It is," she murmured. "Every cell, every pore, every eyelash. Nine years-"

"Yes, yes, I know, yes. But listen."

He swallowed hard and that helped him digest the solution which he now spoke very weakly, then quietly, and then with a kind of growing certainty.

"If what you say happened-"

"It did," she murmured, head down.

"Well, then," he said slowly, and then, "It happened to me, too."

"What?" Her head lifted a trifle.

"It doesn't just happen to one person, right? It happens to all people, everyone in the world. And if that's true, well, my body has been changing along with yours during all the last nine years. Every follicle, every fingernail, all the dermis and epidermis or whatever. I never noticed. But it must have."

Her head was up now and her back was not slumped. He hurried on.

"And if that's true, good Lord, then I'm new, too. The old Tom, Thomas, Tommy, Tomasino is left behind back there with the shed snakeskin."

Her eyes opened and she listened and he finished. "So we're both brand-new. You're the new, beautiful woman I've been thinking about finding and loving in the last year. And I'm that man you were heading out to search for. Isn't that right? Isn't that true?"

There was the merest hesitation and then she gave the smallest, almost imperceptible nod.

"Mercy," he called gently.

"That's not my name," she said.

"It is now. New woman, new body, new name. So I picked one for you. Mercy?"

After a moment she said, "What does that make you?"

"Let me think." He chewed his lip and smiled. "How about Frank? Frankly, my dear, I do give a damn."

"Frank," she murmured. "Frank and Mercy. Mercy and Frank."

"It doesn't exactly ring, but it'll do. Mercy?"

"Yes?"

"Will you marry me?"

"What?"

"I said, will you marry me. Today. An hour from now. Noon?"

She turned at last to look down at him with a face all freshly tanned and washed.

"Oh, yes," she said.

"And we'll run away and be maniacs again, for a little while

"No," she said, "here is fine. Here is wonderful."

"Come down, then," he said, holding his hand up to her. "We have another nine years before another change. Come down and finish your wedding breakfast. Mercy?"

She came down the steps and took his hand and smiled.

"Where's the champagne?" she said.

The end