

Beasts, Ray Bradbury

Beasts

Smith and Conway were almost finished with lunch when they somehow fell into a chat about innocence and evil.

“Ever been struck by lightning?” Smith asked.

“No,” said Conway.

“You know anyone ever was struck by lightning?” said Smith.

“No,” said Conway.

“They exist. A hundred thousand people get hit every year. A thousand or so die, their money fused in their pockets. Every man thinks he will never be hit by lightning. Each thinks himself a true Christian of multitudinous virtues.”

“What has this to do with what we were discussing?” Conway asked.

“This.” Smith lit a cigarette and peered into the flame. “You refuse to see the prevalence of evil in our world, so I use the lightning simile to prove otherwise.”

“What’s the use of my recognizing evil if you won’t accept good?”

“I do. But—” said Smith. “Until men know two things, the world will go merrily on to hell. First, we must see that in every good man lurks a reverse image of evil. Conversely, in every sinner, there is a marrow of good. Locking people into either category spells anarchy.

Thinking a man good, we risk his duplicity. Thinking a man bad, we deny sanctuary. Most are sinner-saints. Schweitzer was a near-saint who bottled his imp or at least let it run on a leash. Hitler was Lucifer, but

somewhere in him wasn't there a child frantic for escape? But that child in Hitler's burnt and gone. So slap on the label and bury his bones."

"You've gone the long way," said Conway. "Shorten it."

"All right." Smith laughed quietly. "You! Your facade is all stiff white wedding cake. Snow falls all year between your ears. Yet, beneath that whiteness, a dark heart beats, black hairs curl like watch springs. The Beast lives there. And until you can face it, one day it will unravel you."

Conway laughed. "Hilarious!" he cried. "Oh, God! Funny!"

"No, sad."

"I'm sorry," Conway gasped, "to insult you, but—"

"You insult yourself," said Smith. "And hurt your chances for a good life, later."

"Please!" Conway laughed. "Stop!"

Smith rose, face flushed.

"Now I've made you mad," said Conway, recovering. "Don't go."

"I'm not mad."

"You talk so, well, old-hat," said Conway.

"New things often seem dated," said Smith. "We surf and think it's bottom."

"Please," said Conway. "Your theories—"

"Discoveries!" said Smith. "I see you've learned nothing."

"Business prevents."

"And church on Sundays? Run by a preacher who hand-laundered you for heaven? Shall I do you a favor? I wonder. Open your eyes.

Telephone PL8-9775."

"Why?"

"Call and listen tonight, tomorrow, the night after. Meet me here Friday."

“Friday—?”

“Call that number.”

“Who’ll answer?”

Smith smiled. “The Beasts.”

Then he was gone.

Conway laughed, paid the bill, strolled forth in fine weather.

“PL8-9775?” He laughed. “Dial and say what? Hello, Beasts?”

He forgot the conversation, the telephone, and the number during dinner with his wife, Norma, said good night to her, and stayed up late reading murders. At midnight the phone rang.

He answered and said, “It must be you.”

“Hell,” said Smith, “you guessed.”

“You want to know if I’ve dialed PL8-9775?”

“I know by your voice, no lightning’s struck. Dial the number. Call!”

Call, he thought. Hell, no. I won’t call!

At one in the morning the phone rang. Who’s that? he wondered. The phone rang. This late? he thought. The phone rang. Who’d call now? The phone rang. Christ! The phone rang. He reached out.

The phone rang. He clutched it. Ring! He held tight. Ring! Now he was wide awake! Ring! Don’t! Ring! He grabbed but did not clap it to his ear. Why? He stared at it as if it were a huge insect, buzzing. Whisper. Clearer. Whisper. Very clear. Whisper. Click! He slammed it down. Christ! He had heard nothing! Something. Whisper.

He kicked the phone across the carpet. Jesus! he thought. Why hit it? Why?

He left it on the floor and went to bed.

But he could hear it buzzing, protesting. Finally he went in and slammed the receiver back into its cradle. There. It was nothing. No. Someone. Smith? He switched off the light. Why did he think he heard several voices? Stupid. No!

He stared back into the parlor.
The phone was silent.
Good! he thought.
But he had heard something.
Something that brought a dampness to his face? No!

He lay awake until ...
Three in the long dark morning. The soul's midnight. When the dying shed their ghosts ...
Hell!
He got out of bed and stalked in to stand over that damned Smith-inspired thing.

The mantel clock chimed three-fifteen. He raised the phone and heard it hum. He sat with the phone in his lap, and at last, slowly, dialed that number.
He had expected to hear a woman's voice, Smith's accomplice, yes, a woman. But only whispers.
And then a blur of voices, as if many calls had fused into a cloud of static. He hung up.

Then, flinching, he redialed and got the same sounds. An electric surf, neither men's nor women's voices, riding each other, protesting, some demanding, some pleading, some ...
Breathing.
Breathing? He stifled the phone. Breathing? In, out. Phones, he thought, do not inhale, exhale.

Smith, he thought, you bastard.
Why?
Because of the strange quality of this breathing.

Strange?

Slowly he brought it up to his ear.

The voices moved apart, and all ...

Breathing heavily, as if they had run a long way. Running in place. In place? How could these voices, male, female, old, young, jog, race, run in place, hold still but rise, fall, up, down?

Then all gave cries, shrieked, gasped, sucked in, blew out.

His cheeks burned. Sweat rained from his chin. Jesus! Dear Jesus God!

The phone fell.

The bedroom door slammed.

At four-thirty A.M. Norma Conway let her arm fall near his face. She touched his chin and brow.

"My God," she said. "You're sick."

He stared at the ceiling. "I'm all right," he said. "Go to sleep."

"But ..."

"I'm fine," he said. "Unless ..."

"Unless?"

"I can come over on your side of the bed."

"With that fever?"

"No, I guess not."

"Can I get you anything?"

"Nothing. Something."

He turned, his breath a furnace.

Everything, he thought, but did not say.

He ate a large breakfast. Norma stroked his brow and exhaled. "Thank God, it's gone."

"Gone?" He shoveled in the bacon and eggs.

"Your fever. I felt it across the bed. You're ravenous. How come?"

He stared at his empty plate.

"I'll be damned, yes," he said. "Sorry about last night."

“Oh, that.” Norma laughed gently. “I just didn’t want you to hurt yourself. Better move. It’s nine. What about the phone?”

On his way out, he stopped.

“Phone?”

“The wall socket looks broken. Shall I call the phone company?”

He stared at the phone on the floor.

“No,” he said.

At the office, at noon, he took the crumpled note from his pocket.

“Stupid,” he said.

And dialed the number.

The phone rang twice and a voice came on. “The number you have dialed is no longer in service.”

“No longer in service!”

Almost instantly, a single line of type jumped up on the fax machine.
PL4-4559.

No signature, no address.

He dialed through to Smith.

“Smith, you bastard, what’re you up to?”

“No good,” Smith said triumphantly. “The old number’s out of commission. Good for just one night. Try the new one. See you, drinks and dumb-talk, yes?”

“Bastard!” Conway yelled and hung up.

And went to the drinking, dumb-talk lunch.

“Say it,” said Smith. “‘Smith, you s.o.b.’ Sit. Your martini awaits. Put a straw in it.”

Conway swayed over the luncheon table, making fists.

“Sit,” said Smith.

Conway downed the martini.

“My, my, you’re thirsty. Well,” Smith leaned forward. “Tell Papa. Upchuck. Confess.”

“No confessions!”

“Well then, what almost happened? Are you guilty, innocent, asking for mercy?”

“Shut up and drink your gin,” said Conway.

“Thanks, I will. In celebration.”

“Celebration?”

“Of the fact you now have the new number. The old one was a freebie. The new, if used, will cost fifty bucks. Tomorrow night, another new number, will run two hundred.”

“My God, why?!”

“You’ll be fascinated. Hooked. Not able to stop. Next week, eight hundred. You’ll pay.”

“Will I?!” Conway cried.

“Softly. Innocence rides free. Guilt costs. Your wife will question your bank balance.”

“She won’t! It won’t happen!”

“Lord, you’re Joan of Arc run amok. She heard voices, too.”

“God’s voices, not phone-sex whispers.”

“True, but still she died. Waiter! Keep the drinks coming. Agreed?”

Conway jerked his head.

“Why so mad?” Smith asked. “We haven’t started lunch and—”

“I haven’t been told things!” Conway said.

“All right, all right. Are you ready?”

Smith drew on the tablecloth with his knife, and talked to the lines.

“Are you familiar with the storm drains under L.A., the dry tunnels that channel our rains, our floods?”

“I know them, yes.”

“Uncover any manhole on any major street, step down in tunnels twenty miles long, all heading for the sea. All of a rainless year it’s empty as a desert runoff. You must walk to the ocean someday with me, under the civilized world. Bored?”

“Continue,” said Conway.

“Wait.” Smith moistened his lips with his martini. “Imagine that every night at three A.M. the doors of every house on the block, every block in the tract, opened and shadows, men in their middle years, walked into the street and lifted the storm drain lids and stepped down into darkness, eh?—and moved toward that far sea they could not hear.

But then it sounded louder and louder as they walked closer and closer with more shadows, all heading toward that surf at three in the morning, inhaling, exhaling, murmuring, sighing, and as they moved, as the fever from their faces lit the storm-drain walls, no need for lights, the fever does it, and the men find more tunnels in motion, a flood under houses, and the city asleep above, not knowing the surge of shadows yearning for a warm sea, whispering, wanting, in love with what? A crazed internet of flesh and blood.”

“Internet, no. Crazed? Yes!”

“But this is real! Not laptop films. Hungry men, rushing, whispering, elbows knocking, shoes scuffing cement, on, on, until they find that far shore on a night with no moon and dawn a salvation a million miles off, but no one wants saving as they flood the shore of that hot sea and stand, trembling, eyes wild, by the thousands, watching volcanic waves burn the shore.”

“What,” said Conway, “are they doing there?”

“Doing? They swim that roaring furnace, that suction, to drown, inhale, exhale out, far out. You heard it last night. So you had to come. The hairs all over your body jumped. Your mouth eats cold steel, gasps flames, right?”

“No!”

“Liar!”

“No,” said Conway. “What are those voices?”

“Homeless libidos, love-starved wannabees.”

“What love is starved, what do they wannabe?”

“Together.” Smith stirred his drink with his little finger. “To be wildly together.”

“How?”

“By its sound, can’t you guess? To be part of that lost soul circuit. To throw themselves in that sea of lust. Ever read Thoreau? He said most men lead lives of quiet desperation.”

“Sad.”

“True. Ours is the sad, desperate channel that brims Venice with unclean floods of driven men. Remember that comic strip Desperate Ambrose? The world swarms with men wanting, not getting, sleepless night Ambroses. Desperate. My God. Body says this, mind that. Men say yes, women no! Were you ever fourteen?”

“For a few years, yes.”

“Touché! You discovered wild hot flesh, but it was years before you touched someone else’s arm, elbow, mouth. How long?”

“Six years.”

“Forever! Alone twenty thousand nights. Loving mirrors. Wrestling pillows. Damnation! Use the new number. Come back tomorrow.”

“You’ve told me nothing!”

“Everything. Act! If you cancel now, to rejoin listening again costs six hundred!”

“Based on what!?”

“On the heavy breathing that made you trash your phone. The Bell Company reported the repairs.”

“How could you know that?”

“No comment.”

“Smith?”

Smith waited, smiling.

“Are you,” said Conway, “God’s Angel, or his dark son?”

“Yes,” said Smith, and left.

Conway telephoned Norma to have the phone canceled.

“Why, for God’s sake?” said Norma.

“Get the phone out. Out!”

“Madness,” she said, and hung up.

He arrived home at five. Norma toured him through the house.

“Hold on,” he protested, “the phone’s still in the library and—”

He glanced toward their bedroom.

“They’ve put a new phone in there!”

“They said you insisted. Did you change the order from take out to put in?”

“My God, no,” he said and walked over to stand by the new device.

“Why would I do that?”

At bedtime he pulled both phones’ jacks, slapped his pillow, lay down, and shut his eyes.

At three in the morning the phones rang and kept ringing. Norma’s put the jacks back in the wall, he thought.

Finally, Norma stirred. “God, I’ll do it!” She sat up.

“No!” he cried.

“What?”

“No, me!” he shouted.

“Calm down.”

“I’m calm!” He seized the phone, which rang and rang as he carried it on its long cord to the other phone, which still rang and rang. He stood motionless. The bedroom door opened wider.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” Norma said.

Ignoring her, he bent to touch and then take the phone but only hold it away. The phone whispered.

At last Norma said: “So? Private calls? Is that some male-menopausal bimbo?”

“No,” he said. “It is not a floozie-bubblehead-camp-follower bimbo!”

The list was so headlong that Norma laughed and shut the door.

No lie, he thought. No bimbo, floozie, bubble-head ... It's—he hesitated, what? Cloud-cuckoo-land, a sinking loveboat of lost women, crazed bachelors, dry heaves, plea-bargaining, salmon migrations upstream to nowhere! What?

“Well,” he said at last and went to open the bedroom door and study the cold white arctic wilderness of bed and its snowblinding empty sheets.

There was a faint rattling behind the bathroom door. The sound of aspirin shaken out as a faucet filled a glass.

He stood by the glacier bed where the floe moved never, and shivered.

The bathroom light went off. He turned and went away.

He sat quietly for an hour and then dialed the new number.

No answer. And then ...

A whisper so vast, so loud, it might comb the dead to wakening. The whispers panted from one line, two, four, ten dozen voices erupting, fused.

And it was the sound of all the girls and women he had always wanted but never had, and it was the sound of all the women he had wanted and had never wanted again, their whispers, their cries, their laughter, their mocking laughter.

And it was the sound of a sea moving in on a shore, but not the tidal floe beyond the trembling surf but a flood of flesh striking other flesh, bodies rising to fall, rising to fall and fall again with vast murmurs, incredible whispers falling, rising, until the whole volcanic mix exploded into downfalls into mindless dark.

An entire population of field gymnasts rushed to leap hurdles, shouting, to drop in surfs of bodies to whine as scramble, to clutch at limbs, to writhe in midnight calisthenics, explorations, arrivals, departures clutched to teeter-totters of ascension and decline, breakaway trapeze actors who reached, seized, held, and let you plunge to strike catchers on a wild field of grabbing, rejecting arms, legs, torsos in full chorus!

Orchestras of hands snatched up to grip, hug, mold. Hurricanes of cries stormed in need, dislodged their holds, then fell in rains of cooling sheets to night calms. All was silence at last except a kind of sigh that dogs might sense, and admire with barks.

Then, a buzz. "Deposit cash!"

"Smith, you son of a bitch," Conway said.

"That's me. Well?"

"What in hell are these voices!?"

"Aliens, neighbors, high-class Party Liners, like when we were small-town kids and our randy neighbors broadcast their pillow talks."

"Why is everyone calling at once?!"

"They're cowards, nervous Nellies, afraid of ravenous insatiabables. Long-distance sumo wrestling, kick-boxing, mattress turning, top back row Elite Theater Saturday nights, drive-ins, motors killed, cars jouncing to pig squeals, weight-lifter grunts, raped canaries."

Conway was silent.

"Cat got your tongue? You a party pooper?"

"Is that a party?"

"Yes! Where they say what they want to say, hidden, old maid in Vermont, wino in Reno, Vancouver priest, altar boy Miami, stripper in Providence, college president Kankakee."

Conway was silent.

"Still there? Hate facts? Damn reality? Pay nothing! Hang up!"

Silence.

"Goodbye! Cut off, damn me, jump in bed, harass the wife! Still there? Still hot-flash wild-love delicatessen curious? Temperature a hundred and two? I'll count to three. Then triple cash for this midnight matinee. One, two ..."

Conway bit his lip.

"You're hooked!" Smith brayed. "Got a mirror? Look!"

Conway stared at the mirror on the wall. A strange mad pink face, slick with sweat, eyes fired, burned there. The phone voice barked!
“See? Bright cheeks. Sweat! Jaw clenched. Eyes like July Fourth!”

Conway exhaled.

“Is that a yes!?” cried Smith. “Last chance. Hang up or a Johnstown Flood of volcanic Krakatoa lava burns your bed. Yes? No? Gotcha!”
Conway at last said: “Dozens of people on-line?”

“Thousands! Once the word spread, mobs joined, the more mobs the higher the rates. Mobs didn’t drive rates down but up. Whoever ran this late-night bender figured it was special, why not lift all the money boats in the same used bathwaters?

Lots of sleepless hungers, plenty of walking wounded, much nameless dark-meat game. You never know who’s talking. That lady, woman, girl squealing with delight, is she your old-maid schoolmarm, your sad aunt who while the old man sleeps punches Dial-A-Ride?

Or your loving dad, loving the Night Family more? The Night Family, all night each night, screaming, snorting, thrashing, drained at dawn coughing hairballs with each unseen mattress-jump. Listen up! Ten thousand raw bods, Freud-crippled Christians, devoured by hello-goodbye panthers, ocelots, raw-tongued lions. Kill, kill me with love, they shout, yell, cry, please, thanks. You there?”

“Here,” whispered Conway. “Do they ever meet?”

“Never. Sometimes.”

“Where?”

“The bait must home where the carnivores roam, right? They don’t want to meet. The wires suffice for nightmare fevers, their barks so high just hyena laptop lapdogs hear. Listen.”

A bedlam choir drowned in static. Yes, yes. More! Oh, yes, yes. More!

“Like them apples?” Smith cut in. “Fresh off Eden’s tree. Sold by the Snake. Midnight park rentals. You will not be driven forth! Drop coins for virtual garden beds.”

“Stop!” said Conway.

“Stop? Taffy-pulling your ravenous groin? Lunch, mañana? If you can creep or crawl to weep thanks to this sinner friend?”

“Kill you,” said Conway.

“I’ll duck faster than you shoot. Jump back on line. Be a torn party favor. Ciao!”

Click! He was gone. The storm of fevers poured in, firing his brain. More heavy breathing. He glanced up.

The wall was lit by the wild fire in his cheeks.

He let the phone fall to lie gasping unspeakable raw things as he staggered toward bed, the flames in his face lighting the floor.

He lay down with whispers and clenched his eyelids and in a moment of sleeping dream heard, far off, the clang of a metal storm drain manhole lid, lifted and slid. He blinked and jerked his head to stare across into the outer room.

Where Norma stood, the telephone thrust to her ear, eyes shut in pain as her color melted and she swayed, breathless, listening, listening.

He lifted up to call but in that instant she seized the cord and, eyes still shut, yanked the whispers out of the wall.

Sleepwalking, she glided toward the bathroom door. With no light he heard her shake and spill the aspirin bottle. The tablets rained in the toilet. The bottle fell to the floor. She flushed three times and turning, walked to stand by the bed for a moment, then lift the blanket and climb in.

After a long moment, he felt her hand touch his elbow. After another moment she whispered. Whispered!

“You awake?”

He nodded in the dark.

“Well,” she whispered. “Now.”

He waited.

“Come over,” she whispered, “on my side of the bed.”

The end