

Drink This: Against the Madness of Crowds, Ray Bradbury

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It was one of those night that are so damned hot you lie flat out lost until 2 :00 a.m., then sway upright, baste yourself with your own sour brine, and stagger down into the great bake-oven subway where the lost trains shriek in.

"Hell," whispered Will Morgan.

And hell it was, with a lost army of beast people wandering the night from the Bronx on out to Coney and back, hour on hour, searching for sudden inhalations of salt ocean wind that might make you gasp with Thanksgiving.

Somewhere, God, somewhere in Manhattan or beyond was a cool wind. By dawn, it must be found. . . .

"Damn!"

Stunned, he saw maniac tides of advertisements squirt by with toothpaste smiles, his own advertising ideas pursuing him the whole length of the hot night island.

The train groaned and stopped.

Another train stood on the opposite track.

Incredible. There in the open train window across the way sat Old Ned Amminger. Old? They were the same age, forty, but . . .

Will Morgan threw his window up.

"Ned, you son of a bitch!"

"Will, you bastard. You ride late like this often?"

"Every damn hot night since 1946!"

"Me, too! Glad to see you!"

"Liar!"

Each vanished in a shriek of steel.

God, thought Will Morgan, two men who hate each other, who work not ten feet apart grinding their teeth over the next step up the ladder,

knock together in Dante's Inferno here under a melting city at 3:00 A.M. Hear our voices echo, fading:

"Liar . . . !"

Half an hour later, in Washington Square, a cool wind touched his brow. He followed it into an alley where . . .

The temperature dropped ten degrees.

"Hold on," he whispered.

The wind smelled of the Ice House when he was a boy and stole cold crystals to rub on his cheeks and stab inside his shirt with shrieks to kill the heat.

The cool wind led him down the alley to a small shop where a sign read:

MELISSA TOAD, WITCH

LAUNDRY SERVICE:

CHECK YOUR PROBLEMS HERE BY NINE A.M. PICK THEM UP, FRESH-CLEANED, AT DUSK

There was a smaller sign:

SPELLS, PHILTRES AGAINST DREAD CLIMATES, HOT OR COLD. POTIONS TO INSPIRE EMPLOYERS AND ASSURE PROMOTIONS. SALVES, UNGUENTS & MUMMY-DUSTS RENDERED DOWN FROM ANCIENT CORPORATION HEADS. REMEDD2S FOR NOISE. EMOLLIENTS FOR GASEOUS OR POLLUTED AIRS. LOTIONS FOR PARANOID TRUCK DRIVERS. MEDICINES TO BE TAKEN BEFORE TRYING TO SWIM OFF THE NEW YORK DOCKS.

A few bottles were strewn in the display window, labeled:

PERFECT MEMORY.

BREATH OF SWEET APRIL WIND.

SILENCE AND THE TREMOR OF FINE BDiDSONG.

He laughed and stopped.

For the wind blew cool and creaked a door. And again there was the memory of frost from the white Ice House grottoes of childhood, a world cut from winter dreams and saved on into August.

"Come in," a voice whispered.

The door glided back.

Inside, a cold funeral awaited him.

A six-foot-long block of clear dripping ice rested like a giant February remembrance upon three sawhorses.

"Yes," he murmured. In his hometown-hardware-store window, a magician's wife, miss i. sickle, had been stashed in an immense rectangle of ice melted to fit her calligraphy. There she slept the nights away, a Princess of Snow. Midnights, he and other boys snuck out to see her smile in her cold crystal sleep. They stood half the summer nights staring, four or five fiery-furnace boys of some fourteen years, hoping their red-hot gaze might melt the ice. ...

The ice had never melted.

"Wait," he whispered. "Look . . ."

He took one more step within this dark night shop.

Lord, yes. There, in this ice! Weren't those the outlines where, only moments ago, a woman of snow napped away in cool night dreams? Yes. The ice was hollow and curved and lovely. But... the woman was gone. Where?

"Here," whispered the voice.

Beyond the bright cold funeral, shadows moved in a far comer.

"Welcome. Shut the door."

He sensed that she stood not far away in shadows. Her flesh, if you could touch it, would be cool, still fresh from her time within the dripping tomb of snow. If he just reached out his hand—

"What are you doing here?" her voice asked, gently.

"Hot night. Walking. Riding. Looking for a cool wind. I think I need help."

"You've come to the right place."

"But this is mail I don't believe in psychiatrists. My friends hate me because I say Tinkerbelle and Freud died twenty years back, with the circus. I don't believe in astrologers, numerologists, or palmistry quacks—"

"I don't read palms. But... give me your hand."

He put his hand out into the soft darkness.

Her fingers tapped his. It felt like the hand of a small girl who had just rummaged an icebox. He said:

"Your sign reads melissa toad, witch. What would a Witch be doing in New York in the summer of 1974?"

"You ever know a city needed a Witch more than New York does this year?'"

"Yes. We've gone mad. But, you?"

"A Witch is born out of the true hungers of her time," she said. "I was born out of New York. The things that are most wrong here summoned me. Now you come, not knowing, to find me. Give me you other hand."

Though her face was only a ghost of cool flesh in the shadows, he felt her eyes move over his trembling palm.

"Oh, why did you wait so long?" she mourned. "It's almost too late."

"Too late for what?"

"To be saved. To take the gift that I can give."

His heart pounded. "What can you give me?"

"Peace," she said. "Serenity. Quietness in the midst of bedlam. I am a child of the poisonous wind that copulated with the East River on an oil-slick, garbage-infested midnight. I turn about on my own parentage. I inoculate against those very bites that brought me to light. I am a serum born of venoms. I am the antibody of all Time. I am the Cure. You die of the City, do you not? Manhattan is your punisher. Let me be your shield."

"How?"

"You would be my pupil. My protection could encircle you, like an invisible pack of hounds. The subway train would never violate your ear. Smog would never blight your lung or nostril or fever your vision. I could teach your tongue, at lunch, to taste the rich fields of Eden in the merest cut-rate too-ripe frankfurter. Water, sipped from your office cooler, would be a rare wine of a fine family. Cops, when you called, would answer. Taxis, off-duty rushing nowhere, would stop if you so much as blinked one eye. Theater tickets would appear if you stepped to a theater window. Traffic signals would change, at high noon, mind you! if you dared to drive your car from Fifty-eighth down to the Square, and not one light red. Green all the way, if you go with me.

"If you go with me, our apartment will be a shadowed jungle glade full of bird cries and love calls from the first hot sour day of June till the last hour after Labor Day when the living dead, heat-beat, go mad on stopped trains coming back from the sea. Our rooms will be filled with crystal chimes. Our kitchen an Eskimo hut in July where we might share out a provender of Popsicles made of Mumm's and Chateau Lafite Rothschild. Our larder?—fresh apricots in August or February. Fresh orange juice each morning, cold milk at breakfast, cool kisses at four in the afternoon, my mouth always the flavor of chilled peaches, my body the taste of rimed plums. The flavor begins at the elbow, as Edith Wharton said.

"Any time you want to come home from the office the middle of a dreadful day, I will call your boss and it will be so. Soon after, you will be the boss and come home, anyway, for cold chicken, fruit wine punch, and me. Summer in the Virgin Isles. Autumns so ripe with promise you will indeed go lunatic in the right way. Winters, of course, will be the reverse. I will be your hearth. Sweet dog, lie there. I will fall upon you like snowflakes.

"In sum, everything will be given you. I ask little in return. Only your soul."

He stiffened and almost let go of her hand.

"Well, isn't that what you expected me to demand?" She laughed.

"But souls can't be sold. They can only be lost and never found again. Shall I tell you what I really want from you?"

"Tell."

"Marry me," she said.

Sell me your soul, he thought, and did not say it.

But she read his eyes. "Oh, dear," she said. "Is that so much to ask? For all I give?"

"I've got to think it over!"

Without noticing, he had moved back one step.

Her voice was very sad. "If you have to think a thing over, it will never be. When you finish a book you know if you like it, yes? At the end of a

play you are awake or asleep, yes? Well, a beautiful woman is a beautiful woman, isn't she, and a good life a good life?"

"Why won't you come out in the light? How do I know you're beautiful?"

"You can't know unless you step into the dark. Can't you tell by my voice? No? Poor man. If you don't trust me now, you can't have me, ever."

"I need time to think! I'll come back tomorrow night! What can twenty-four hours mean?"

"To someone your age, everything."

"I'm only forty!"

"I speak of your soul, and that is late."

"Give me one more night!"

"You'll take it, anyway, at your own risk."

"Oh, God, oh, God, oh, God, God," he said, shutting his eyes.

"I wish He could help you right now. You'd better go. You're an ancient child. Pity. Pity. Is your mother alive?"

"Dead ten years."

"No, alive," she said. He backed off toward the door and stopped, trying to still his confused heart, trying to move his leaden tongue:

"How long have you been in this place?"

She laughed, with the faintest touch of bitterness.

"Three summers now. And, in those three years, only six men have come into my shop. Two ran immediately. Two stayed awhile but left. One came back a second time, and vanished. The sixth man finally had to admit, after three visits, he didn't Believe. You see, no one Believes a really all-encompassing and protective love when they see it clear. A farmboy might have stayed forever, in his simplicity, which is rain and wind and seed. A New Yorker? Suspects everything.

"Whoever, whatever, you are, O good sir, stay and milk the cow and put the fresh milk in the dim cooling shed under the shade of the oak tree which grows in my attic. Stay and pick the watercress to clean your teeth. Stay in the North Pantry with the scent of persimmons and kumquats and grapes. Stay and stop my tongue so I can cease talking

this way. Stay and stop my mouth so I can't breathe. Stay, for I am weary of speech and must need love. Stay. Stay."

So ardent was her voice, so tremulous, so gentle, so sweet, that he knew he was lost if he did not run.

"Tomorrow night!" he cried.

His shoe struck something. There on the floor lay a sharp icicle fallen from the long block of ice.

He bent, seized the icicle, and ran.

The door slammed. The lights blinked out. Rushing, he could not see the sign: MELISSA toad, witch.

Ugly, he thought, running. A beast, he thought, she must be a beast and ugly. Yes, that's it! Lies! All of it, lies! She-He collided with someone.

In the midst of the street, they gripped, they held, they stared.

Ned Amminger! My God, it was Old Ned!

It was four in the morning, the air still white-hot. And here was Ned Amminger sleepwalking after cool winds, his clothes scuffed on his hot flesh in rosettes, his face dripping sweat, his eyes dead, his feet creaking in their hot baked leather shoes.

They swayed in the moment of collision.

A spasm of malice shook Will Morgan. He seized Old Ned Amminger, spun him about, and pointed him into the dark alley. Far off deep in there, had that shop-window light blinked on again? Yes!

"Ned! That way! Go there!"

Heat-blinded, dead-weary Old Ned Amminger stumbled off down the alley.

"Wait!" cried Will Morgan, regretting his malice.

But Amminger was gone.

In the subway, Will Morgan tasted the icicle.

It was Love. It was Delight. It was Woman.

By the time his train roared in, his hands were empty, his body rusted with perspiration. And the sweet taste in his mouth? Dust.

Seven a.m. and no sleep.

Somewhere a huge blast furnace opened its door and burned New York to ruins.

Get up, thought Will Morgan. Quick! Run to the Village!

For he remembered that sign:

LAUNDRY SERVICE: CHECK YOUR PROBLEMS

HERE BY NINE A.M. PICK THEM UP, FRESH-CLEANED, AT NIGHT

He did not go to the Village. He rose, showered, and went off into the furnace to lose his job forever.

He knew this as he rode up in the raving-hot elevator with Mr. Binns, the sunburned and furious personnel manager. Binns's eyebrows were jumping, his mouth worked over his teeth with unspoken curses. Beneath his suit, you could feel porcupines of boiled hair needling to the surface. By the time they reached the fortieth floor, Binns was anthropoid.

Around them, employees wandered like an Italian army coming to attend a lost war.

"Where's Old Amminger?" asked Will Morgan, staring at an empty desk.

"Called in sick. Heat prostration. Be here at noon," someone said.

Long before noon the water cooler was empty, and the air-conditioning system?—committed suicide at 11:32. Two hundred people became raw beasts chained to desks by windows which had been invented not to open.

At one minute to twelve, Mr. Binns, over the intercom, told them to line up by their desks. They lined up. They waited, swaying. The temperature stood at ninety-seven. Slowly, Binns began to stalk down the long line. A white-hot sizzle of invisible flies hung about him.

"All right, ladies and gentlemen," he said. "You all know there is a recession, no matter how happily the President of the United States put it. I would rather knife you in the stomach than stab you in the back. Now, as I move down the line, I will nod and whisper, 'You.' To those of you who hear this single word, turn, clean out your desks, and be gone.

Four weeks' severance pay awaits you on the way out. Hold on!
Someone's missing!"

"Old Ned Amminger," said Will Morgan, and bit his tongue.

"Old Ned?" said Mr. Binns, glaring. "Old? Old?"

Mr. Binns and Ned Amminger were exactly the same age.

Mr. Binns waited, ticking.

"Ned," said Will Morgan, strangling on self-curses, "should be here-"

"Now," said a voice.

They all turned.

At the far end of the line, in the door, stood Old Ned or Ned Amminger. He looked at the assembly of lost souls, read destruction in Binns's face, flinched, but then slunk into line next to Will Morgan.

"All right," said Binns. "Here goes."

He began to move, whisper, move, whisper. Two people, four, then six turned to clean out their desks.

Will Morgan took a deep breath, held it, waited.

Binns came to a full stop in front of him.

Don't say it? thought Morgan. Don't!

"You," whispered Binns.

Morgan spun about and caught hold of his heaving desk. You, the word cracked in his head, you!

Binns stepped to confront Ned Amminger.

"Well, old Ned," he said.

Morgan, eyes shut, thought: Say it, say it to him, you're fired, Ned, fired!

"Old Ned," said Binns, lovingly.

Morgan shrank at the strange, the friendly, the sweet sound of Binns's voice.

An idle South Seas wind passed softly on the air. Morgan blinked and stood up, sniffing. The sun-blasted room was filled with scent of surf and cool white sand.

"Ned, why dear old Ned," said Mr. Binns, gently.

Stunned, Will Morgan waited. I am mad, he thought.

"Ned," said Mr. Binns, gently. "Stay with us. Stay on."

Then, swiftly: "That's all, everyone. Lunch!"

And Binns was gone and the wounded and dying were leaving the field. And Will Morgan turned at last to look full at Old Ned Amminger, thinking, Why, God, why?

And got his answer . . .

Ned Amminger stood there, not old, not young, but somehow in-between. And he was not the Ned Amminger who had leaned crazily out a hot train window last midnight or shambled in Washington Square at four in the morning.

This Ned Amminger stood quietly, as if hearing far green country sounds, wind and leaves and an amiable time which wandered in a fresh lake breeze.

The perspiration had dried on his fresh pink face. His eyes were not bloodshot but steady, blue and quiet. He was an island oasis in this dead and unmoving sea of desks and typewriters which might start up and scream like electric insects. He stood watching the walking-dead depart. And he cared not. He was kept in a splendid and beautiful isolation within his own calm cool beautiful skin.

"No!" cried Will Morgan, and fled.

He didn't know where he was going until he found himself in the men's room frantically digging in the wastebasket.

He found what he knew he would find, a small bottle with the label: DRINK ENTIRE: AGAINST THE MADNESS OF CROWDS.

Trembling, he uncorked it. There was the merest cold blue drop left inside. Swaying by the shut hot window, he tapped it to his tongue.

In the instant, his body felt as if he had leaped into a tidal wave of coolness. His breath gusted out in a fount of crushed and savored clover.

He gripped the bottle so hard it broke. He gasped, watching the blood.

The door opened. Ned Amminger stood there, looking in. He stayed only a moment, then turned and went out. The door shut.

A few moments later, Morgan, with the junk from his desk rattling in his briefcase, went down in the elevator.

Stepping out, he turned to thank the operator.

His breath must have touched the operator's face.

The operator smiled.

A wild, an incomprehensible, a loving, a beautiful smile!

The lights were out at midnight in the little alley, in the little shop. There was no sign in the window which said melissa toad, witch. There were no bottles.

He beat on the door for a full five minutes, to no answer. He kicked the door for another two minutes.

And at last, with a sigh, not wanting to, the door opened.

A very tired voice said: "Come in."

Inside he found the air only slightly cool. The huge ice slab, in which he had seen the phantom shape of a lovely woman, had dwindled, had lost a good half of its weight, and now was dripping steadily to ruin.

Somewhere in the darkness, the woman waited for him. But he sensed that she was clothed now, dressed and packed, ready to leave. He opened his mouth to cry out, to reach, but her voice stopped him:

"I warned you. You're too late."

"It's never too late!" he said.

"Last night it wouldn't have been. But in the last twenty hours, the last little thread snapped in you. I feel. I know. I tell. It's gone, gone, gone."

"What's gone, God damn it?"

"Why, your soul, of course. Gone. Eaten up. Digested. Vanished. You're empty. Nothing there."

He saw her hand reach out of darkness. It touched at his chest. Perhaps he imagined that her fingers passed through his ribs to probe about his lights, his lungs, his beating and pitiful heart.

"Oh, yes, gone," she mourned. "How sad. The city unwrapped you like a candy bar and ate you all up. You're nothing but a dusty milk bottle left on a tenement porch, a spider building a nest across the top. Traffic din pounded your marrow to dust. Subway sucked your breath like a cat sucks the soul of a babe. Vacuum cleaners got your brain. Alcohol dissolved the rest. Typewriters and computers took your final dregs in and out their tripes, printed you on paper, punched you in confettis, threw you down a sewer vent. TV scribbled you in nervous tics on old

ghost screens. Your final bones will be carried off by a big angry bulldog crosstown bus holding you munched in its big rubber-lipped mouth door."

"No!" he cried. "I've changed my mind! Marry me! Marry!"

His voice cracked the ice tomb. It shattered on the floor behind him. The shape of the beautiful woman melted into the floor. Spinning about, he plunged into darkness.

He fell against the wall just as a panel slammed shut and locked.

It was no use screaming. He was alone.

At dusk in July, a year later, in the subway, he saw Ned Amminger for the first time in 365 days.

In all the grind and ricochet and pour of fiery lava as trains banged through, taking a billion souls to hell, Amminger stood as cool as mint leaves in green rain. Around him wax people melted. He waded in his own private trout stream.

"Ned!" cried Will Morgan, running up to seize his hand and pump it.

"Ned, Ned! The best friend I ever had!"

"Yes, that's true, isn't it?" said young Ned, smiling.

And oh God, how true it was! Dear Ned, fine Ned, friend of a lifetime! Breathe upon me, Ned! Give me your life's breath!

"You're president of the company, Ned! I heard!"

"Yes. Come along home for a drink?"

In the raging heat, a vapor of iced lemonade rose from his creamy fresh suit as they looked for a cab. In all the curses, yells, horns, Ned raised his hand.

A cab pulled up. They drove in serenity.

At the apartment house, in the dusk, a man with a gun stepped from the shadows.

"Give me everything," he said.

"Later," said Ned, smiling, breathing a scent of fresh summer apples upon the man.

"Later." The man stepped back to let them pass. "Later."

On the way up in the elevator, Ned said, "Did you know I'm married? Almost a year. Fine wife."

"Is she," said Will Morgan, and stopped, ". . . beautiful?"

"Oh, yes. You'll love her. You'll love the apartment."

Yes, thought Morgan; a green glade, crystal chimes, cool grass for a carpet. I know, I know.

They stepped out into an apartment that was indeed a tropic isle. Young Ned poured huge goblets of iced champagne.

"What shall we drink to?"

"To you, Ned. To your wife. To me. To midnight, tonight."

"Why midnight?"

"When I go back down to that man who is waiting downstairs with his gun. That man you said 'later' to. And he agreed 'later/ I'll be there alone with him. Funny, ridiculous, funny. And my breath just ordinary breath, not smelling of melons or pears. And him waiting all those long hours with his sweaty gun, irritable with heat. What a grand joke. Well ... a toast?"

"A toast!"

They drank.

At which moment, the wife entered. She heard each of them laughing in a different way, and joined in their laughter.

But her eyes, when she looked at Will Morgan, suddenly filled with tears.

And he knew whom she was weeping for.

The end