



Driving Blind, Ray Bradbury

Driving Blind

"Did you see that?"

"See what?"

"Why, hell, look there!"

But the big six-passenger 1929 Studebaker was already gone.

One of the men standing in front of Fremley's Hardware had stepped down off the curb to stare after the vehicle.

"That guy was driving with a hood over his head. Like a hangman's hood, black, over his head, driving blind!"

"I saw it, I saw it!" said a boy standing, similarly riven, nearby. The boy was me, Thomas Quincy Riley, better known as Tom or Quint and mighty curious. I ran. "Hey, wait up! Gosh! Driving blind!"

I almost caught up with the blind driver at Main and Elm where the Studebaker turned off down Elm followed by a siren. A town policeman on his motorcycle, stunned with the traveling vision, was giving pursuit.

When I reached the car it was double-parked with the officer's boot up on the running board and Willy Crenshaw, the officer, scowling in at the black Hood and someone under the Hood.

"Would you mind taking that thing off?" he said.

"No, but here's my driver's license," said a muffled voice. A hand with the license sailed out the window.

"I want to see your face," said Willy Crenshaw.

"It's right there on the license."

"I want to check and see if the two compare," said Willy Crenshaw.

"The name is Phil Dunlop," said the Hooded voice. "121 Desplaines Street, Gurney. Own the Studebaker Sales at 16 Gurney Avenue. It's all there if you can read."

Willy Crenshaw creased his forehead and inched his eyesight along the words.

"Hey, mister," I said. "This is real neat!"

"Shut up, son." The policeman ground his boot on the running board.

"What youupto?"

I stood arching my feet, peering over the officer's shoulder as he hesitated to write up a ticket or jail a crook.

"What youupto?" Willy Crenshaw repeated.

"Right now," said the Hooded voice, "I'd like a place to stay overnight so I can prowl your town a few days."

Willy Crenshaw leaned forward. "Whatkindof prowling?"

"In this car, as you see, making people sit up and notice."

"They done that," the policeman admitted, looking at the crowd that had accumulated behind Thomas Quincy Riley, me.

"Is it a big crowd, boy?" said the man under the Hood.

I didn't realize he was addressing me, then I quickened up.

"Sockdolager!" I said.

"You think if I drove around town twenty-four hours dressed like this, people might listen for one minute and hear what I say?"

"All ears," I said.

"There you have it, Officer," said the Hood, staring straight ahead, or what seemed like. "I'll stay on, 'cause the boy says. Boy," said the voice, "you know a good place for me to shave my unseen face and rest my feet?"

"My grandma, she—"

"Sounds good. Boy—"

"Name's Thomas Quincy Riley."

"Call you Quint?"

"How'd you guess?"

"Quint, jump in, show the way. But don't try to peek under my cover-up."

"No, sir!"

And I was around the car and in the front seat, my heart pure jackrabbit.

"Excuse us, Officer. Any questions, I'll be sequestered at this child's place."

"Six one nine Washington Street—" I began.

"I know, I know!" cried the officer. "Damnation."

"You'll let me go in this boy's custody?"

"Hell!" The policeman jerked his boot off the running board which let the car bang away.

"Quint?" said the voice under the dark Hood, steering.

"What's my name?"

"You said—"

"No, no. What do you want to call me?"

"Hmm. Mr. Mysterious?"

"Bull's-eye. Where do I turn left, right, right, left, and right again?"

"Well," I said.

And we motored off, me terrified of collisions and Mr. Mysterious, real nice and calm, made a perfect left.

Some people knit because their fingers need preoccupations for their nerves.

Grandma didn't knit, but plucked peas from the pod. We had peas just about most nights in my life. Other nights she plucked lima beans. String beans? She harped on those, too, but they didn't pluck as easy or

as neat as peas. Peas were it. As we came up the porch steps, Grandma eyed our arrival and shelled the little greens.

"Grandma," I said. "This is Mr. Mysterious."

"I could see that." Grandma nodded and smiled at she knew not what.

"He's wearing a Hood," I said.

"I noticed." Grandma was still unaffected and amiable.

"He needs a room."

"To need, the Bible says, is to have. Can he find his way up? Excuse the question."

"Andboard," I added.

"Beg pardon, how's he going to eat through that thing?"

"Hood," I said.

"Hood?"

"I can manage," Mr. Mysterious murmured.

"He can manage," I translated.

"That'll be worth watching." Grandma stitched out more green peas.

"Sir, do you have a name?"

"I just told you," I said.

"So you did." Grandma nodded. "Dinner's at six," she said, "sharp."

The supper table, promptly at six, was loud with roomers and boarders. Grandpa having come home from Goldfield and Silver Creek, Nevada, with neither gold nor silver, and hiding out in the library parlor behind his books, allowed Grandma to room three bachelors and two bachelor ladies upstairs, while three boarders came in from various neighborhoods a few blocks away.

It made for a lively breakfast, lunch, and dinner and Grandma made enough from this to keep our ark from sinking. Tonight there was five

minutes of uproar concerning politics, three minutes on religion, and then the best talk about the food set before them, just as Mr. Mysterious arrived and everyone shut up. He glided among them, nodding his Hood right and left, and as he sat I yelled:
"Ladies and gentlemen, meet Mr.—"

"Just call me Phil," murmured Mr. Mysterious.
I sat back, somewhat aggrieved.
"Phil," said everyone.

They all stared at him and couldn't tell if he saw their stares through the black velvet. How's he going to eat, hid like that, they thought. Mr. Mysterious picked up a big soup spoon.
"Pass the gravy, please," he whispered.

"Pass the mashed potatoes," he added quietly.
"Pass the peas," he finished.

"Also, Mrs. Grandma ... " he said. Grandma, in the doorway, smiled. It seemed a nice touch: "Mrs." He said, " ... please bring me my blue-plate special."

Grandma placed what was indeed a Chinese garden done in blue ceramics but containing what looked to be a dog's dinner. Mr. Mysterious ladled the gravy, the mashed potatoes, and the peas on and mashed and crushed it shapeless as we watched, trying not to bug our eyes.

There was a moment of silence as the voice under the dark Hood said,
"Anyone mind if I say grace?"
Nobody would mind.

"O Lord," said the hidden voice, "let us receive those gifts of love that shape and change and move our lives to perfection. May others see in us only what we see in them, perfection and beauty beyond telling. Amen."

"Amen," said all as Mr. M. snuck from his coat a thing to astonish the boarders and amaze the rest.

"That," someone said (me), "is the biggest darn soda fountain straw I ever seen!"

"Quint!" said Grandma.

"Well, it is."

And it was. A soda fountain straw two or three times larger than ordinary which vanished up under the Hood and probed down through the mashed potatoes, peas, and gravy dog's dinner which silently ascended the straw to vanish in an unseen mouth, silent and soundless as cats at mealtime.

Which made the rest of us fall to, self-consciously cutting, chewing, and swallowing so loud we all blushed.

While Mr. Mysterious sucked his liquid victuals up out of sight with not even so much as a purr. From the corners of our eyes we watched the victuals slide silently and invisibly under the Hood until the plate was hound's-tooth clean. And all this done with Mr. M.'s fingers and hands fixed to his knees.

"I—" said Grandma, her gaze on that straw, "hope you liked your dinner, sir."

"Sockdolager," said Mr. Mysterious.

"Ice cream's for dessert," said Grandma. "Mostly melted."

"Melted!" Mr. M. laughed.

It was a fine summer night with three cigars, one cigarette, and assorted knitting on the front porch and enough rocking chairs going somewhere-in-place to make dogs nervous and cats leave.

In the clouds of cigar smoke and a pause in the knitting, Grandpa, who always came out after dark, said:

"If you don't mind my infernal nerve, now that you're settled in, what'snext?"

Mr. Mysterious, leaning on the front porch rail, looking, we supposed, out at his shiny Studebaker, put a cigarette to his Hood and drew some smoke in, then out without coughing. I stood watching, proudly.

"Well," said Mr. M., "I got several roads to take. See that car out there?"

"It's large and obvious," said Grandpa.

"That is a brand-new class-A Studebaker Eight, got thirty miles on it, which is as far from Gurney to here and a few runaround blocks. My car salesroom is just about big enough to hold three Studebakers and four customers at once. Mostly dairy farmers pass my windows but don't come in. I figured it was time to come to a live-wire place, where if I shouted 'Leap' you might at least hop."

"We're waiting," said Grandpa.

"Would you like a small demonstration of what I pray for andwillrealize?" said the cigarette smoke wafting out through the fabric in syllables. "Someone say 'Go.'"

Lots of cigar smoke came out in an explosion.

"Go!"

"Jump, Quint!"

I reached the Studebaker before him and Mr. Mysterious was no sooner in the front seat than we took off.

"Right and then left and then right, correct, Quint?"

And right, left, right it was to Main Street and us banging away fast.

"Don't laugh so loud, Quint."

"Can't help it! This ispeacherino!"

"Stop swearing. Anyone following?"

"Three young guys on the sidewalk here. Three old gents off the curb there!"

He slowed. The six following us soon became eight.

"Are we almost at the cigar-store corner where the loudmouths hang out, Quint?"

"You know we are."

"Watch this!"

As we passed the cigar store he slowed and choked the gas. The most terrific Fourth of July BANG fired out the exhaust. The cigar-store loudmouths jumped a foot and grabbed their straw hats. Mr. M. gave them another BANG, accelerated, and the eight following soon was a dozen.

"Hot diggity!" cried Mr. Mysterious. "Feel their love, Quint? Feel their need? Nothing like a brand-new eight-cylinder super prime A-1 Studebaker to make a man feel like Helen just passed through Troy! I'll stop now that there's folks enough for arguments to possess and fights to keep. So!"

We stopped dead-center on Main and Arbogast as the moths collected to our flame.

"Is that a brand-new just-out-of-the-showroom Studebaker?" said our town barber. The fuzz behind my ears knew him well.

"Absolutely spanking brand-new," said Mr. M.

"I was here first, I get to ask!" cried the mayor's assistant, Mr. Bagadosian.

"Yeah, but I got the money!" A third man stepped into the dashboard light. Mr. Bengstrom, the man who owned the graveyard and everyone in it.

"Got only one Studebaker now," said the sheepish voice under the Hood.

"Wish I had more."

That set off a frenzy of remorse and tumult.

"The entire price," said Mr. M. in the midst of the turmoil, "is eight hundred and fifty dollars. The first among you who slaps a fifty-dollar

bill or its equivalent in singles, fives, and tens in my hand gets to pink-slip this mythological warship home."

No sooner was Mr. Mysterious' palm out the window than it was plastered with fives, tens, and twenties.

"Quint?"

"Sir?"

"Reach in that cubby and drag out my order forms."

"Yes, sir!"

"Bengstrom! Cyril A. Bengstrom!" the undertaker cried so he could be heard.

"Be calm, Mr. Bengstrom. The car is yours. Sign here."

Moments later, Mr. Bengstrom, laughing hysterically, drove off from a sullen mob at Main and Arbogast. He circled us twice to make the abandoned crowd even more depressed then roared off to find a highway and test his craze.

"Don't fret," said the voice under the dark Hood. "I got one last Studebaker prime A-I vehicle, or maybe two, waiting back in Gurney. Someone drop me there?"

"Me!" said everyone.

"So that's the way you function," said Grandpa. "That's why you're here." It was later in the evening with more mosquitoes and fewer knitters and smokers. Another Studebaker, bright red, stood out at the curb. "Wait till they see the sun shine on this one," said Mr. Mysterious, laughing gently.

"I have a feeling you'll sell your entire line this week," said Grandpa, "and leave us wanting."

"I'd rather not talk futures and sound uppity, but so it seems."

"Sly fox." Grandpa tamped philosophy in his pipe and puffed it out.
"Wearing that sack over your head to focus need and provoke talk."
"It's more than that." Mr. M. sucked, tucking a cigarette through the dark material over his mouth. "More than a trick. More than a come-on. More than a passing fancy."
"What?" said Grandpa.

"What?" I said.
It was midnight and I couldn't sleep.
Neither could Mr. Mysterious. I crept downstairs and found him in the backyard in a wooden summer recliner perhaps studying the fireflies and beyond them the stars, some holding still, others not.

"Hello, Quint!" he said.
"Mr. Mysterious?" I said.
"Askme."
"You wear that Hood even when yousleep?"

"All night long every night."
"For most of your life?"
"Almost most."
"Last night you said it's more than a trick, showing off. Whatelse?"

"If I didn't tell the roomers and your grandpa, why should I tell you, Quint?" said the Hood with no features resting there in the night.
" 'Cause I want to know."

"That's about the best reason in the world. Sit down, Quint. Aren't the fireflies nice?"
I sat on the wet grass. "Yeah."

"Okay," said Mr. Mysterious, and turned his head under his Hood as if he were staring at me. "Here goes. Ever wonder what's under this Hood, Quint? Ever have the itch to yank it off and see?"
"Nope."
"Why not?"

"That lady in The Phantom of the Opera did. Look where it got her."

"Then shall I tell you what's hidden, son?"

"Only if you want to, sir."

"Funny thing is, I do. This Hood goes back a long way."

"From when you were a kid?"

"Almost. I can't recall if I was born this way or something happened. Car accident. Fire. Or some woman laughing at me which burned just as bad, scarred just as terrible. One way or another we fall off buildings or fall out of bed. When we hit the floor it might as well have been off the roof. It takes a long time healing. Maybe never."

"You mean you don't remember when you put that thing on?"

"Things fade, Quint. I have lived in confusion a long while. This dark stuff has been such a part of me it might just be my living flesh."

"Do—"

"Do what, Quint?"

"Do you sometimes shave?"

"No, it's all smooth. You can imagine me two ways, I suppose. It's all nightmare under here, all graveyards, terrible teeth, skulls and wounds that won't heal. Or—"

"Or?"

"Nothing at all. Absolutely nothing. No beard for shaving. No eyebrows. Mostly no nose. Hardly any eyelids, just eyes. Hardly any mouth; a scar. The rest a vacancy, a snowfield, a blank, as if someone had erased me to start over. There. Two ways of guessing. Which do you pick?"

"I can't."

"No."

Mr. Mysterious arose now and stood barefooted on the grass, his Hood pointed at some star constellation.

"You," I said, at last. "You still haven't told what you started tonight to tell Grandpa. You came here not just to sell brand-new Studebakers—but but for something else?"

"Ah." He nodded. "Well. I been alone a lot of years. It's no fun over in Gurney, just selling cars and hiding under this velvet sack. So I decided to come out in the open at last and mix with honest-to-goodness people, make friends, maybe get someone to like me or at least put up with me. You understand, Quint?"

"I'm trying."

"What good will all this do, living in Green Town and thriving at your supper table and viewing the tree-tops in my cupola tower room? Ask."

"What good?" I asked.

"What I'm hoping for, Quint, what I'm praying for, son, is that if I delve in the river again, wade in the stream, become part of the flow of folks, people, strangers even, some sort of kind attention, friendship, some sort of half-love will begin to melt and change my face. Over six or eight months or a year, to let life shift my mask without lifting it, so that the wax beneath moves and becomes something more than a nightmare at three A.M. or just nothing at dawn. Any of this make sense, Quint?"

"Yeah. I guess."

"For people do change us, don't they? I mean you run in and out of this house and your grandpa changes you and your grandpa shapes you with words or a hug or your hair tousled or maybe once a year, a slap where it hurts."

"Twice."

"Twice, then. And the boarders and roomers talk and you listen and that goes in your ears and out your fingers and that's change, too. We're all in the wash, all in the creeks, all in the streams, taking in every morsel of gab, every push from a teacher, every shove from a bully, every look and touch from those strange creatures, for you called women. Sustenance.

It's all breakfast tea and midnight snacks and you grow on it or you don't grow, laugh or scowl or don't have any features one way or the other, but you're out there, melting and freezing, running or holding still.

I haven't done that in years. So just this week I got up my courage—knew how to sell cars but didn't know how to put me on sale. I'm taking a chance, Quint, that by next year, this face under the Hood will make itself over, shift at noon or twilight, and I'll feel it changing because I'm out wading in the stream again and breathing the fresh air and letting people get at me, taking a chance, not hiding behind the windshield of this or that Studebaker.

And at the end of that next year, Quint, I'll take off my Hood forever." At which point, turned away from me, he made a gesture. I saw the dark velvet in his hand as he dropped it in the grass.

"Do you want to see what's here, Quint?" he asked, quietly.

"No, sir, if you don't mind."

"Why not?"

"I'm scared," I said, and shivered.

"That figures," he said, at last. "I'll just stand here a moment and then hide again."

He took three deep breaths, his back to me, head high, face toward the fireflies and a few constellations. Then the Hood was back in place.

I'm glad, I thought, there's no moon tonight.

Five days and five Studebakers later (one blue, one black, two tans, and one sunset-red) Mr. Mysterious was sitting out in what he said was his final car, a sun-yellow open roadster, so bright it was a canary with its own cage, when I came strolling out, hands in overall pockets, watching the sidewalk for ants or old unused firecrackers. When Mr. M. saw me he moved over and said, "Try the driver's seat."

"Boy! Can I?"

I did, and twirled the wheel and honked the horn, just once, so as not to wake any late-sleepers.

" 'Fess up, Quint," said Mr. Mysterious, his Hood pointed out through the windshield.

"Do I look like I need 'fessing'?"

"You're ripe-plumful. Begin."

"I been thinking," I said.

"I could tell by the wrinkles in your face," said Mr. M., gently.

"I been thinking about a year from now, and you."

"That's mighty nice, son. Continue."

"I thought, well, maybe next year if you felt you were cured, under that Hood, that your nose was okay and your eyebrows neat, and your mouth good and your complexion—"

I hesitated. The Hood nodded me on.

"Well, I was thinking if you got up one morning and without even putting your hands up to feel underneath you knew the long waiting was over and you were changed, people and things had changed you, the town, everything, and you were great, just great, no way of ever going back to nothing."

"Go on, Quint."

"Well, if that happened, Mr. Mysterious, and you just knew you were really great to see forever, why then, Mr. M., you wouldn't have to take off your Hood, would you?"

"What'd you say, son?"

"I said, you wouldn't have to ta—"

"I heard you, Quint, I heard," gasped Mr. M.

There was a long silence. He made some strange sounds, almost like choking, and then he whispered hoarsely, "No, I wouldn't need to take off my Hood."

" 'Cause it wouldn't matter, would it? If you really knew that underneath, everything was okay. Sure?"

"Oh, Lord yes, sure."

"And you could wear the Hood for the next hundred years and only you and me would know what's underneath. And we wouldn't tell or care."

"Just you and me. And what would I look like under the Hood, Quint? Sockdolager?"

"Yes, sir."

There was a long silence and Mr. Mysterious' shoulders shook a few times and he made a quiet choking sound and all of a sudden some water dripped off the bottom of his Hood.

I stared at it. "Oh," I said.

"It's all right, Quint," he said, quietly. "It's just tears."

"Gosh."

"It's all right. Happy tears."

Mr. Mysterious got out of the last Studebaker then and touched at his invisible nose and dabbed at the doth in front of his unseen eyes.

"Quintessential Quint," he said. "No one else like you in the whole world."

"Heck, that goes foreveryone,don't it?"

"If you say so, Quint."

Then he added:

"Got any last things to upchuck or confess, son?"

"Some silly stuff. What if—?"

I paused and swallowed and could only look ahead through the steering wheel spokes at the naked silver lady on the hood.

"What if, a long time ago, you neverneededthe Hood?"

"You mean never? Neverever?"

"Yes, sir. What if a long time ago you onlythoughtyou needed to hide and put on that stuff with no eyeholes even. What if there was never any accident, or fire, or you weren't born that way, or no lady ever laughed at you, whatthen?"

"You mean I only imagined I had to put on this sackcloth and ashes? And all these years I been walking around thinking therewassomething awful or just nothing, a blank underneath?"

"It just came to me."

There was a long silence.

"And all these years I been walking around not knowing or pretending I had something to hide, for no reason, because my face was there all the time, mouth, cheeks, eyebrows, nose, and didn't need melting down to be fixed?"

"I didn't mean—"

"You did." A final tear fell off the bottom rim of his Hood. "How old are you, Quint?"

"Going on thirteen."

"No. Methuselah."

"He was real old. But did he have any jellybeans in his head?"

"Like you, Quincy. A marvel of jellybeans."

There was a long silence, then he said:

"Walk around town? Need to flex my legs. Walk?"

We turned right at Central, left at Grand, right again and stopped in front of the Karcher Hotel, the highest building in Green County or beyond.

"Quint?"

His Hood pointed up along the building while his voice under observed.

"Thomas Quincy Riley, you got that one last thing look. Spit it out."

I hesitated and said, "Well. Up inside that Hood, is it really dark? I mean, there's no radio gadgets or see-back-oscopes or secret holes?"

"Thomas Quincy Riley, you been reading the Johnson Smith & Co.

Tricks, Toys, Games and Halloween Catalogue from Racine, Wisconsin."

"Can't help it."

"Well, when I die you'll inherit this sack, wear it, and know darkness."
The head turned and I could almost feel his eyes burn the dark material.

"Right now, I can look through your ribs and see your heart like a flower or a fist, opening, closing, open, shut. You believe that?"

I put my fist on my chest.

"Yes, sir," I said.

"Now."

He turned to point his Hood up along the hotel for twelve stories.

"Know what I been thinking?"

"Sir?"

"Stop calling myself Mr. Mysterious."

"Oh, no!"

"Hold on! I've done what I came for. Car sales are runaway. Hallelujah. But look, Quint. Look up and touch. What if I became the Human Fly?"
I gasped. "You mean—"

"Yessireebob. Can't you just see me up six stories and eight and twelve at the top, with my Hood still on, waving down at the crowd?"

"Gee!"

"Glad for your approval." Mr. M. stepped forward and started to climb, reaching for holds, finding, and climbing more. When he was three feet up he said, "What's a goodtallname for a Human Fly?"

I shut my eyes, then said:

"Hightower!"

"Hightower, by God! Do we go home to breakfast?"

"Yes, sir."

"Mashed bananas, mashed cornflakes, mashed oatmeal—"

"Ice cream!" I added.

"Melted," said the Human Fly and climbed back down.

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The end