

Heart Transplant, Ray Bradbury

Heart Transplant

“Would I what?” he asked, in the dark, lying there easily, looking at the ceiling.

“You heard me,” she said, lying there beside him with similar ease, holding his hand, but staring rather than looking at that ceiling, as if there were something there that she was trying to see. “Well ...?”

“Say it again,” he said.

“If,” she said, after a long pause, “if you could fall in love with your wife again ... would you?”

“What a strange question.”

“Not so strange. This is the best of all possible worlds, if the world ran the way worlds should run. Wouldn't it make sense, finally, for people to fall in love again and live happily ever after? After all, you were once wildly in love with Anne.”

“Wildly.”

“You can never forget that.”

“Never. Agreed.”

“Well, then, that being true—would you—”

“Could would be more like it.”

“Forget about could. Let's imagine new circumstances, everything running right for a change, your wife behaving the way you describe her once-perfection instead of the way she acts now. What then?”

He leaned up on his elbow and looked at her.

“You're in a strange mood tonight. What gives?”

“I don't know. Maybe it's tomorrow. I'm forty, next month you're forty-two. If men go mad at forty-two, shouldn't women become sane two years earlier? Or maybe I'm thinking, What a shame. What a shame people don't fall in love and stay in love with the same people all their

lives, instead of having to find others to be with, laugh with or cry with; what a shame ...”

He reached over and touched her cheek and felt a wetness there.

“Good grief, you’re crying.”

“Just a little bit. It’s so damned sad. We are. They are. Everybody. Everyone. Sad. Was it always this way?”

“And hidden, I think. Nobody said.”

“I think I envy those people a hundred years ago.”

“Don’t envy what you can’t even guess. There was a lot of quiet madness under their serene notalk.”

He leaned over and kissed the tears from under her eyes, lightly.

“Now, what brought all this on?”

She sat up and didn’t know what to do with her hands.

“What a joke,” she said. “Neither you nor I smoke. In books and movies, when people lie in bed after, they light cigarettes.” She put her hands across her breast and held on, as she talked. “It’s just, I was thinking of good old Robert, good old Bob, and how crazy I was for him once, and what am I doing here, loving you, when I should be home minding my thirty-seven-year-old-baby husband?”

“And?”

“And I was thinking how much I really, truly like Anne. She’s a great woman; do you know that?”

“Yes, but I try not to think of it, everything considered. She’s not you.”

“But what if, suddenly”—she clasped her hands around her knees and fixed him with a bright, clear-blue gaze—“what if she were me?”

“I beg your pardon?” He blinked.

“What if all the qualities you lost in her and found in me were somehow given back to her? Would you, could you, love her all over again?”

“Now I really do wish I smoked!” He dropped his feet out onto the floor and kept his back to her, staring out the window. “What’s the use of asking that kind of question, when there can never be an answer!?”

“That is the problem, though, isn’t it?” She addressed his back. “You have what my husband lacks and I have what your wife lacks. What’s needed is a double soul—no, a double heart transplant!” She almost laughed and then, deciding against it, almost cried.

“There’s an idea there for a story, a novel, maybe a film.”

“It’s our story and we’re sunk with it, and no way out, unless—”

“Unless?”

She got up and moved restlessly about the room, then went to stand and look out at the stars in the summer night sky.

“What makes it so rough is Bob’s beginning to treat me the way he once treated me. The last month he’s been so ... fine, so terrific.”

“Oh, my God.” He sighed and shut his eyes.

“Yes. Oh, my God.”

There was a long silence. At last, he said, “Anne’s been acting better, too.”

“Oh, my God,” she repeated, in a whisper, shutting her own eyes. Then, at last, she opened them and traced the stars. “What’s the old thing? ‘If wishes were horses, beggars would ride’?”

“You’ve lost me for the third or fourth time in as many minutes.”

She came and knelt on the floor by him and took both of his hands in hers and looked into his face.

“My husband, your wife are both out of town tonight, yes, at the far ends of the country, one in New York, the other in San Francisco. Correct? And you’re sleeping over in this hotel room with me and we have all night together, but—” She stopped, searched, located and then tried the words: “But what if, just before we go to sleep, what if we made a kind of mutual wish, me for you, you for me?”

“A wish?” He started to laugh.

“Don’t.” She shook his hands. He quieted. She went on: “A wish that while we slept, somehow, by a miracle, please God, please all the Graces and Muses and magical times and great dreams, somehow, some way, we would both”—she slowed and then continued—“both fall back in love, you with your wife, me with my husband.”

He said nothing.

“There,” she said.

He reached over, found some matches on the side table, struck one, and held it up to light her face. The fire glowed in her eyes and would not go away. He exhaled. The match went out.

“I’ll be damned,” he whispered. “You mean it.”

“I do, and we are. Damned, that is. Would you try?”

“Lord—”

“Don’t say Lord as if I had gone crazy on you.”

“Look—”

“No, you look.” She took his hands again and pressed them, hard. “For me. Would you do me the favor? And I’d do the same for you.”

“Make a wish?”

“We often did, as kids. They sometimes worked. They worked because they weren’t really wishes, they were prayers.”

He lowered his eyes. “I haven’t prayed in years.”

“Yes, you have. Count the times you wish you were back in the first month of your marriage. That’s a kind of forlorn wish, a lost prayer.”

He looked at her and swallowed several times.

“Don’t say anything,” she said.

“Why not?”

“Because right now, you feel you have nothing to say.”

“I’ll be quiet, then. Let me think. Do you, God, do you really want me to make a wish for you?”

She sank back and sat on the floor, her hands in her lap, eyes shut. Quietly, tears began to slide down her cheeks.
“Dear, oh, my dear,” he said softly.

It was three in the morning and the talking was done and they had ordered some hot milk and drunk it and brushed their teeth, and now, as he came out of the bathroom, he saw her arranging the pillows on the bed, as if this were a special new theater in a special new time.
“What am I doing here?” he said.

She turned. “Once we used to know. Now we don’t. Come along.” She gestured and patted his side of the bed.
He rounded the bed. “I feel silly.”

“You have to feel silly just so you can feel better.” She pointed at the bed.
He got in and put his head on the properly plumped pillow and folded the sheets neatly over his chest and clasped his hands on the sheets.
“Does this look right?” he asked.
“Perfect. Now.”

She put out the light and slid in on her side and took one of his hands and lay back perfectly straight and neat on her pillow.
“Feeling tired, feeling sleepy?”
“Enough,” he said.

“All right, then. Be serious now. Don’t say anything. Just think. You know what.”
“I know.”
“Shut your eyes now. There. Good.”

She shut her own and they lay there, with just their hands clasped and nothing in the room now that stirred save their breathing.
“Take a breath,” she whispered.
He took a breath.
“Now exhale.”
He exhaled.

She did the same.

“Now,” she murmured. “Begin.” She whispered. “Wish.”
Thirty seconds ticked by on their watches.
“Are you wishing?” she asked softly, at last.

“Wishing,” he said, just as softly.
“Good,” she whispered. And then: “Good night.”
Perhaps a minute later, his quiet voice, inaudible, moved in the dark room:
“Goodbye.”

He awoke for no reason except that he had had a dream that the earth had shrugged, or an earthquake had happened ten thousand miles away that no one felt, or that there had been a second Annunciation but everyone was deaf, or perhaps it was only that the moon had come into the room during the night and changed the shape of the room and changed the looks on their faces and the flesh on their bones and now had stopped so abruptly that the quick silence had stirred his eyes wide. In the moment of opening, he knew the streets were dry, there had been no rain. Only, perhaps, some sort of crying.

And, lying there, he knew that somehow the wish had been granted. He didn't know it immediately, of course. He sensed and guessed it because of an incredible new warmth in the room, nearby, which came from the lovely woman lying by his side.

The sureness, the regularity, the serene rise and fall of her breathing told him more. A spell had arrived, resolved itself, and passed straight on into truthful existence while she slept. Celebration was in her blood now, even though she was not awake to know it. Only her dream knew, and whispered it every time she exhaled.

He rose up onto his elbow, afraid to trust his intuition.
He bent to look at that face, more beautiful than he had ever known it.

Yes, the sign was there. The absolute certainty was there. The peace was there. The sleeping lips smiled. If her eyes had opened, they would have been blazing with light.

Wake up, he wanted to say. I know your happiness. Now you must discover it. Wake up.

He reached to touch her cheek but pulled his hand away. Her eyelids moved. Her mouth opened.

Quickly, he turned and lay huddled over on his side of the bed and waited.

After a long while, he heard her sit up. Then, as if struck a lovely blow, she exclaimed something, cried out, reached over, touched him, found him asleep, and sat beside him, discovering what he already knew.

He heard her get up and run around the room like a bird wishing to be free. She came and kissed him on the cheek, went away, came back, kissed him again, laughed softly, then went off quickly into the sitting room. He heard her dialing long distance and shut his eyes, tightly.

“Robert?” her voice said, at last. “Bob? Where are you? Silly. Stupid of me. I know where you are. Robert. Bob, oh, God, can I fly there, will you be there when I arrive, today, this afternoon, tonight, yes? Would it be all right? ... What’s come over me? I don’t know. Don’t ask. Can I come? Yes? Say yes! ... Oh, grand! Goodbye!”

He heard the telephone click.

After a while, he heard her blowing her nose as she entered the room and sat on the bed next to him in the first light of dawn. She had dressed quickly and haphazardly, and now he reached out and took her hand.

“Something happened,” he whispered.

“Yes.”

“The wish. It came true.”

“Isn’t it incredible? Impossible, but it did! Why? How?”

“Because both of us believed,” he said, quietly. “I wished very hard, for you.”

“And I for you. Oh, Lord, isn’t it wonderful that both of us could shift at the same time, move, change, all in a night? Otherwise, it would be terrible, wouldn’t it, if just one changed and the other was left behind?”
“Terrible,” he admitted.

“Is it really a miracle?” she asked. “Did we wish hard enough and someone or something or God heard us and lent us back our old loves to warm us and tell us to behave, we might never have another wish or another chance again, is that it?”

“I don’t know. Do you?”

“Or was it just our secret selves knowing the time was over, a new time had come, and time for us to both turn around and go, is that the real truth?”

“All I know is I heard you on the phone just now. When you’re gone, I’ll call Anne.”

“Will you?”

“I will.”

“Oh, Lord, I’m so happy for you, for me, for us!”

“Get out of here. Go. Get. Run. Fly away home.”

She jumped to her feet and banged at her hair with a comb and gave up, laughing. “I don’t care if I look funny—”

“Beautiful,” he corrected.

“Beautiful to you, maybe.”

“Always and forever.”

She came and bent down and kissed him and wept.

“Is this our last kiss?”

“Yes.” He thought about it. “The last.”

“One more, then.”

“Just one.”

She held his face in her hands and stared into it.

“Thanks for your wish,” she said.

“Thanks for yours.”

“You calling Anne right now?”

“Now.”

“Best to Anne.”

“Best to Bob. God love you, dear lady. Goodbye.”

She was out the door and in the next room and the outside door shut and the hotel suite was very quiet. He heard her footsteps fade a long way off in the hall toward the elevator.

He sat looking at the phone but did not touch it. He looked in the mirror and saw the tears beginning to stream unendingly out of his eyes.

“You, there,” he said to his image. “You. Liar.” And again: “Liar!”

And he turned and lay back down in the bed and put one hand out to touch that empty pillow there.

The end