

In Memoriam, Ray Bradbury

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All the way home that late afternoon, driving through the winding streets, enjoying the weather, admiring the jacaranda trees and the violet snow they were letting down on the lawns, he noticed, but merely from the corner of his eyes, the apparatuses in front of almost every other garage.

But they passed behind him without being named. They were familiar but there was no special reason to give them notice.

The basketball hoops and boards above the garages, waiting for games. Nothing special. No particular connotations.

Until he drove up in front of his house in the autumn weather and saw his wife standing, arms folded, out on the sidewalk, watching a young man up on a stepladder, his hands busy with a screwdriver and hammer. Neither noticed him until he banged the car. The young man looked down and his wife looked over as he gave a surprising cry.

“What the hell goes on?” he shouted, and was amazed at his own emotion. His wife gave a calm response.

“Why, we’re just taking it down, is all. It’s been up there for years, and ...”

The husband glared up along the ladder.

“Get down off there,” he said.

“Why?” his wife said.

“I don’t have to have a reason, dammit, get down!”

The young man nodded, rolled his eyeballs to heaven, and climbed down.

“Now put the ladder away!” the husband said.

“You don’t have to shout,” his wife said.

“Am I? Well. Just put the ladder away. Thanks.”

“That’s more like it,” she said.

The young man carried the ladder into the open garage and left, quietly, in his car.

The husband and wife, during all this, stood in the middle of the driveway gazing up at the basketball hoop.

When the car was gone, she said, “Now what’s all this about?”

“You know!” he cried, and lowered his voice. “Hell.” He looked at his hands, on which had fallen a surprise of tears. “What’s this?”

“If you don’t know, no one does.” She softened her voice. “Come inside.”

“Not until we finish.”

“The ladder’s gone and the hoop stays up. For now, anyway.”

“No, not for now,” he said, doggedly. “From now on.”

“But why?”

“I want it there. Just in case.”

“In case what?”

“There’s got to be one place in all the damned world that’s his. There’s nothing out at the graveyard. There’s nothing anywhere in this country. Nothing in Saigon, especially Saigon. So, when I look up at this, hell, you know what I mean.”

She looked up at the net and the hoop.

“Next thing you’ll put flowers—”

“Don’t make jokes!”

“I’m sorry. It’s just—you won’t let go.”

“Why should I?”

“For your own good.”

“What about his good?”

“I don’t know the answer. Do you?”

"It'll come. God, I'm sick to my stomach. Where's the damn ladder, I'll knock it all down."

She stared at him so he wandered into the garage and rummaged among newspapers and discovered the basketball, looked out at the hoop, but did not bring the ball out.

She called into the unlit garage.

"You hungry?"

"No," he said tiredly. "I guess."

"I'll fix something." He heard her walk to the front porch. As the door was shutting, he said, "Thanks."

He walked out to stand under the hoop and watched the wind shake the net.

"Why?" he said quietly. "Why in hell?"

He glanced along the street west and then along the street east. Down both ways there were garage fronts with basketball boards and hoops, stirred by the same wind, never removed, some for one reason, some for another.

He counted two on one side of the street, and three on the other. What a great way, he thought, to know what kind of families live in those houses.

He stood for a long while until he felt his wife move behind the front screen door, then he shut the garage door and went in.

There was wine with dinner, not often observed. She filled his glass twice and waited.

"Forgive me," she said at last. "But you do realize, don't you? He's never coming back."

"Don't!" he said, and pushed his chair back and put his knife and fork down.

"Someone's got to say it."

"No they don't."

"We said it all before. It's been years."

"I don't care how many years."

She looked down at her plate and said, "Drink your wine."

"I will when I feel like it." At last he picked up the glass. "Anyway, thanks." He drank.

After a long silence she said, "How much longer will this go on?"

"Now that you've started it up again?"

"I didn't mean to start it up. I just got out the ladder and hired some help."

"You just didn't figure, is all."

"It's just," she said, "you haven't slept well lately. I thought maybe if I— well, I wanted to find a way to help you rest. That's not so bad, is it? You're worn out."

"Am I?" He felt his knees and nodded. "Yes. I am."

"It must be," she said, at last, "you're waiting for something. What?"

"I wish I knew." He picked up his fork but did not eat. "It's just last night and the night before I listened."

"For what?"

"Something. I must have lain there for an hour, just listening. Waiting. But there was nothing."

"Eat. You're starving."

"Yes, but starving for what?"

"Here," she said. "Finish the wine."

At bedtime she said, "Try to sleep."

"You can't try sleeping, it's got to happen."

"Try anyway," she said. "I worry." She kissed his cheek and went to the bedroom door.

"I'll be in in a minute," he said.

Far across town he heard a single university bell chime midnight, and then one, and then two o'clock. He sat with an unread book in his lap

and a new bottle of wine to one side, eyes shut, waiting. The wind outside rose.

Finally when the distant bell sounded three, he got up and walked out the front door and opened the garage. He went in and stood for a long moment, regarding the basketball. He did not carry it out in the light but simply let it sit on the cement floor.

If I leave the garage door open, he thought, that should do it. He went out and almost glanced up at the net, but thought, Don't look. Don't notice. That way, maybe—
He shut his eyes and turned to just stand there in the moonlight, listening, aching to hear, swaying slightly, but not once opening his eyes to look up at the board and the hoop and the net.

The wind shivered in the trees.

Yes, he thought.

A leaf blew across the drive.

Yes, he thought, oh, yes.

A soft sound rose, like someone running a long way off and then, nearer, walking, and then nothing.

And after a while a motion around him and other sounds, some fast, some slow, circling.

Yes, he thought. Oh God yes.

And, eyes shut, he reached out both hands to feel the air, but there was only wind and moonlight.

Yes, he thought. Now.

And again: Now.

And yet again: Now.

At dawn his wife came to sit on his bed. The motion wakened him. He looked up at her face.

"It's gone," she said.

"What?"

She glanced away to the front window.

He rose slowly and moved to the window and stared down at the front of the garage.

There was no board, no hoop, no net.

“What happened last night?” she said.

“Something.”

“What?”

“I don’t know. The weather maybe. The moon moving made things move and I asked all of it what?”

His wife waited, her hands in her lap.

“And?”

“Okay, I said, whoever you are, whatever this is, if we play one last game, can I sleep? One last game? I could feel the weather on my face and along my arms. The moon went out and came back. That was the sign. I moved. The weather moved.”

“And then?”

“We played a last game.”

“I thought I heard.” She took a deep breath.

“Who won?”

“We did,” he said.

“You both can’t win.”

“You can. If you try.”

“And you both won.”

“Both.”

She came to stand with him and study the empty garage front.

“Did you take it down?”

“Someone did.”

“I didn’t hear you get the ladder.”

“I must’ve. It was hard climbing up, but even harder climbing down. My eyes kept filling up. I couldn’t see.”

“Where did you put all that stuff?” she said.

“Don’t know. We’ll find it when we least expect.”

“Thank God it’s over.”

“Over, yes, but best of all—”

“What?”

“A tie,” he said.

And repeated, “A tie.”

The end