

My Son, Max, Ray Bradbury

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I have this wonderful ability to read lips. It came from growing up with two boy cousins who had hearing problems, and they passed the “language” on to me at an early age.

What the hell, I thought, aged nine, if you’re going to be around boys like this, you might as well steal secrets.

For I had found that, across parlors, or in halls, I could tune in on people and they were never the wiser.

So I have led a secret life and never told anyone that the merest syllable dropped from a lip forty or eighty yards away was mine. No silent word moves through the world without entering my eye to make me smile.

So, armed with this ability, I often dine alone; for, in truth, I am dining with families.

Any mouth that I choose to watch becomes my brother, sister, father, mother, or old maid aunt. And if I choose not to “listen” I merely scan my wine, my steak, and my eating utensils, or find fascination in chandeliers.

This one night, I did not need, nor did I want, chandeliers.

I had just finished ordering when a family of three arrived and sat directly opposite me, in such a way that if I missed any of the sweets or poisons dropping from their mouths, in pantomime, the rest I might catch in either ear.

They were a handsome father and mother in their forties, and a son of some twenty years, equally handsome, or, no, beautiful. So beautiful

that you knew without knowing that every time he came down to earth there was an eager but soon dissatisfied woman reaching up to grab or an even more ravenous man seizing and keeping.

So it was very sad for me to glance up from time to time to see this man and wife and their lighter-than-air child examining their menus as if a list of their lives was there; the mother calm, the father looking as if he had been hit by life and sunk.

In every glance at his son was not recrimination, but a terrible sad acceptance. The son was obviously the only son, and there would be no marriage, no children, no passing on of the name. Everything ended here tonight, at this table, with this child, much loved, but unaccommodating to life.

The father looked to be one of those who had rarely stormed at fate, cursed, or dared to throw the son out. His was a deep misery from which he might never surface. He had so looked forward to a lineage, some sort of family, no matter how spare.

Wine was ordered, poured, and as the silent three drank, their faces came to a focus.

Oh, good Lord, yes, I said to myself. They dined here about a year ago! And this, by God, is the second chapter. I'll find out what's happened since. It's the despair family, only this time, they do not look quite as despairing!

I settled in, watching their mouths, occasionally catching a drift of words, and was soon re-immersed in their incredible lives. Soon, I was remembering it all.

A year ago had been a disastrous, half-eaten meal, from which the father had risen, with a distempered and multicolored face, only to have the mother run out after him begging him to return, while the son slowly finished a glass of wine, eyes down, and after a long while, very much alone, paid the bill and, it almost seemed, sneaked away.

Now, watching the family—their name was Robinson, I heard the headwaiter say—it seemed to me that they all looked younger than last January. That night long ago, I had watched them age with shock, horror, incredulity, and then an anger that leaned into madness.

At least on the father's part. His face had got redder and redder, while his wife's had got paler and paler, and the son's complexion took on some of each, mottled and blotched with confusion.

The son had realized, too late, that confession was not good for the soul. He had described his hidden life honestly and completely and seen his parents suffering instant devastation.

Now, as I waited, I counted the glasses of wine the father took to solidify his will and loosen his tongue. He was almost beaming when he leaned forward, his enunciation so pronounced it was easy for me to read his lips.

"Now listen to me," he said. "I have something to tell you." He poured more wine for the two of them. "You recall, our dinner here, oh, last New Year's, and here it is nearly Christmas, yes? Well. Back then, Ronald, you admitted to the sort of life you've been leading. To say that we were stunned would be putting it mildly. Not that we hadn't suspected, but you always chide yourself back into ignorance.

After all, you think, it can't happen in our family. And then when we met several of your friends, the safe fell off the building and we were crushed. Sorry to admit, it's true. Anyway, it took me a month to get back up on my feet, lying awake nights thinking wild thoughts, and then one afternoon in late March having another safe dropped on me.

Only this time, it was a wonderfully incredible blow. An inspiration. I had been running around in the rat maze for weeks, with no way out. After all, you are our only son. No use convincing you that you should get married, put up a front, have children.

I don't know what the percentages are in marriages like that. I'm sure they occur and we never know it, or find out about it, later, when there's a separation or a divorce. Anyway, I knew after several false starts there was no use bargaining a future with you when you were not listening."

The young man put down his empty wineglass.

"Lord, Dad," he said, "get on with it."

"Am I taking too long?" asked the father, sitting back, surprised at himself.

His wife said, "Yes, dear, a bit. Where is all this leading?"

The father ducked his head in sudden embarrassment, then looked up, saw the empty wineglasses, and refilled them.

"Well, it's this. Do you know that Miss Gilham in my office?"

"The pretty one, the one with the legs," said his wife.

"You have noticed, then." He ducked his head again, and color crept into his face.

"Good Lord, I think I know what's coming," said the young man.

"No you don't. Not by half!"

"I think I do," said his wife.

"No, nor you, either. You see, it's very complicated, yet at the same time simple. I gave her a year off!"

"To do what?" asked his wife, puzzled.

"At full salary. To have a baby. Mine."

"Hold on!" cried the wife.

But he was on his feet.

"Be right back." And he was gone toward the men's room, leaving his wife and son with a large black safe neatly dropped and crashed in their midst now.

"Jesus," said the young man at last. "He's crazy."

"I wish he were," said the mother.

They sat and waited until the father returned, sat down, without looking at them, drank more wine, and said, “Well?”

“What do you mean, well?” said the son. “You toss a bomb in our faces and run. Is this some crummy joke? To say all this in front of one of us would be bad enough. But in front of both of us? Christ.”

“It was the only way,” the father admitted. “Facing you one at a time would have been an ordeal. This way, somehow, it’s cushioned. Now, before either of you says anything more—”

“We haven’t said anything yet,” said the wife.

“I am not leaving home,” said the husband. “I do not want a divorce, I still love you very much, and I have not seen my secretary again, except to give her her weekly check.”

“I don’t believe it,” said the wife.

“I will not touch the woman again, ever. The child is due to be born at Christmas—splendid timing. And, most important, grandest of all, it is going to be a boy!”

He sat back smiling around at his audience, waiting for their response.

The wife sighed and shadows passed over her face, without leaving a trace of something to say.

The son pushed back from the table and tossed his napkin on his plate.

“Is this supposed to be some sort of insult to me?” he asked.

“No. Only a response,” said the father. “I couldn’t sit still with no future. I was so damned unhappy I had to react. And then suddenly it hit me: start a new life, find the right woman, have a boy child, give it my name, and, twenty years from now—bam. Immortality. More families, more children. God’s in his heaven, all’s right with the world!”

“And this stupid woman has gone along with your dumb idea!” cried the son.

“She is not stupid and she has gone along. She is muy simpatica, as they say. She saw my deeps of depression, locked in the graveyard as it

were, with a living son who was, in effect, dead. She knew how to cry, 'Lazarus, come forth!' And I left the graveyard. And twenty years from now, I will be, well, let me see, nearly seventy, that's not bad, seventy, and happy.

I will give the boy our family name, of course. You need never see him, don't be afraid of that. Now, the next and final thing is, do we go on as before? Does my wife still love me in spite of this madness?

Will my son speak to me, or take affront and move out? I hope both answers from the two of you will be made out of some lopsided understanding and much love. Ah, here comes the dessert cart, not a moment too soon."

While the father indicated and accepted a strawberry tart the son leaned forward.

"Do you have a name for this—this—" He stopped and flushed.

"Bastard?"

"No!"

"You were going to say 'bastard.' Say it."

"Bastard."

"There, feel better? Yes, I have a name! Maximilian—"

"Maximilian!?"

"Max. My son Max. God, that sounds good, don't you agree? A name like that? Royalty. It has a regal sound. Max, my son."

"And will he move into my room when I move out?"

"Are you moving out? No need. I wouldn't dream of burdening your mama. Besides, my secretary is pleased to be a mother and looks forward to eighteen or twenty years of work and play with the child. I will visit him, of course, and take him out six or seven times a week, so he has a proper father."

There was a still longer silence as coffee was placed on the table.

"Well, Mother," said Ronald, "aren't you going to say something?"

“Yes.” The mother frowned and then said, “I’ll be Goddamned.”

This time it was the son who plunged out of the restaurant. He sailed out, a trim ship in a high wind, his beautiful nose prowling the air. His mother ran after.

The father stayed, maundering over the bill, then, with some leisure, finished the last of the wine, rose, and walked past me. He stopped with his back to me. At first I didn’t think he was speaking to me, but then he repeated his question: “You read lips, don’t you?”

“What?”

I turned and he looked at me with steady gray eyes.

“Raised in a family of deaf-mutes?”

“Sort of,” I admitted uneasily.

“It’s all right. You a writer?”

“How did you guess?”

“Anyone that watches lips that closely has got to be something. It was quite a story, wasn’t it?”

“I didn’t catch it all,” I lied.

The father laughed quietly and nodded. “Yes, you did. But it’s okay. None of it’s true.”

I almost dropped my dessert spoon. “What!?”

“I had to think of something. I suppose it’s been collecting up all year. All of a sudden, tonight, bam! You going to write it down when you get home?”

“No. Yes. I don’t know. But—”

“But what?”

I swallowed with difficulty. “I—I just wish it were true.”

The father pulled a cigar out of his pocket, looked at it, found a lighter, lit it, smoked a big puff out on the air, and looked at the elusive stuff

shaping and reshaping itself and blowing away into nothing. His eyes were watchful and growing wet, with all this.

“So do I, son,” he said, and walked away. “So do I.”

After a long moment I ordered another bottle of wine. When it was opened and poured, the waiter said, “Think you can finish that much?”

“I’m going to try,” I said. “Let me try.”

The end