

# Tête-à-Tête, Ray Bradbury

## Tête-à-Tête

We were walking along the boardwalk in Ocean Park one summer evening, arm in arm, my friend Sid and me, when we saw a familiar sight on one of the benches just ahead, not far from the surf.

“Look,” I said, “and listen.”

We looked and listened.

There was this old Jewish couple, he I would say about seventy and she maybe sixty-five, moving their mouths and hands at the same time, everyone talking, nobody listening.

“I told you more than once,” he said.

“What did you tell? Nothing!” she said.

“Something,” he said, “I’m always telling you something. Of great importance if you’d give a try.”

“Great importance, listen to him!” she said rolling her eyes. “Give me a list!”

“Well, about the wedding ...”

“Still the wedding?”

“Sure! The waste, the confusion.”

“Who was confused?”

“I could show you—”

“Don’t show. Look, I’m deaf!”

Et cetera, et cetera.

“I wish I had a tape recorder,” I said.

“Who needs a tape recorder,” Sid replied. “I could say what I just heard. Call me at three in the morning and I’ll quote.”

We moved on. “They’ve been sitting on that same bench every night for years!”

“I believe it,” said Sid. “They’re hilarious.”

“You don’t find it sad?”

“Sad? Come off it! They’re a vaudeville team. I could put them on the Orpheum circuit tomorrow!”

“Not even a little sad?”

“Stop. I bet they’re married fifty years. The yammer started before the wedding and kept going after their honeymoon.”

“But they don’t listen!”

“Hey, they’re taking turns! First hers not to listen, then his. If they ever paid attention they’d freeze. They’ll never wind up with Freud.”

“Why not?”

“They’re letting it all hang out, there’s nothing left to carp or worry about. I bet they get into bed arguing and are asleep with smiles in two minutes.”

“You actually think that?”

“I had an aunt and uncle like that. A few insults shape a long life.”

“How long did they live?”

“Aunt Fannie, Uncle Asa? Eighty, eighty-nine.”

“That long?”

“On a diet of words, distemper almost, Jewish badminton—he hits one, she hits it back, she hits one, he hits it back, nobody wins but, hell, no one loses.”

“I never thought of it that way.”

“Think,” said Sid. “Come on, it’s time for refills.”

We turned and strolled back on this fine summer night.

“And another thing!” the old man was saying.

“That’s ten dozen other things!”

“Who’s counting?” he said.

“Look. Where did I put that list?”

“Lists, who cares for lists?”

“Me. You don’t, I do. Wait!”

“Let me finish!”

“It’s never finished,” Sid observed as we moved on and the great arguments faded in our wake.

Two nights later Sid called and said, “I got me a tape recorder.”

“You mean?”

“You’re a writer, I’m a writer. Let’s trap a little grist for the mills.”

“I dunno,” I said.

“On your feet,” said Sid.

We strolled. It was another fine mild California night, the kind we don’t tell Eastern relatives about, fearful they might believe.

“I don’t want to hear,” he said.

“Shut up and listen,” she said.

“Don’t tell me,” I said, eyes shut. “They’re still at it. Same couple. Same talk. Shuttlecock’s always in the air over the net. No one’s on the ground. You really going to use your tape recorder?”

“Dick Tracy invented, I use.”

I heard the small handheld machine snap as we moved by, slowly.

“What was his name? Oh, yeah. Isaac.”

“That wasn’t his name.”

“Isaac, sure.”

“Aaron!”

“I don’t mean Aaron, the older brother.”

“Younger!”

“Who’s telling this?”

“You. And bad.”

“Insults.”

“Truths you could never take.”

“I got scars to prove it.”

“Hot dog,” said Sid as we glided on with their voices in his small device.

And then it happened. One, two, three, like that.  
Quite suddenly the bench was empty for two nights.

On the third night I stopped in a small kosher delicatessen and talked, nodding at the bench. I didn't know the names. Sure, they said, Rosa and Al, Al and Rosa. Stein, they said, that was the name. Al and Rosa Stein, there for years, never missed a night. Now, Al will be missed. That was it. Passed away Tuesday. The bench sure looks empty, right, but what can you do?

I did what I could, prompted by an incipient sadness about two people I didn't really know, and yet I knew. From the small local synagogue I got the name of the almost smaller graveyard and for reasons confused and half-known went one late afternoon to look in, feeling like the twelve-year-old goy I once was, peering into the temple in downtown L.A., wondering what it was like to be part of all that chanting and singing, with all those men in hats.

In the graveyard I found what I knew I would find. The old woman was there, seated next to a stone bearing his name. And she was talking, talking, talking, touching the stone, talking to the stone. And he? What else? Was not listening.  
I waited, heard, shut my eyes and backed away.

With the sun gone and fog coming in with night I passed the bench. It was still empty, which made it worse.

So what can you do?

I called Sid.

“About that tape recorder of yours?” I said. “And some of those tapes?”

On one of the last nights of summer, Sid and I took our usual stroll down the kosher esplanade, passing the fine pastrami and cheesecake emporiums, stopped for some of that and walked on near the two

dozen benches by the sea, talking and greatly contented, when Sid suddenly remarked, "You know, I have often wondered—"

"What's to wonder?" I said, for he was looking ahead at that bench, which had stayed empty for almost a week.

"Look." Sid touched my arm. "That old woman?"

"Yes?"

"She's back! I thought she was sick or something, but there she is."

"I know," I smiled.

"Since when? The same bench. And talking like crazy."

"Yes," I said, and we walked closer.

"But," said Sid as quiet as he could, "there's no one there. She's talking to herself."

"Almost," I said. We were very close. "Listen."

"You give me the same smarts. Arguments, who needs?" the old woman was saying, leaning forward toward the empty half of the bench, eyes fiery, face intense, mouth in full motion. "Arguments, who needs? I got plenty. Listen!"

And then, even more astonishing: a reply.

"Give a listen, she says!" a voice cried. "For what, how come?"

"That voice!" Sid exclaimed, then whispered. "His voice. But he's dead!"

"Yes," I said.

"And another thing," the old woman said, "look how you eat. Sometime, watch!"

"Easy for you to say!" the old man's voice shot back.

"Go ahead, say!"

There was a click. Sid's eyes slid down. He saw what I saw, his borrowed small handheld recorder in the old woman's palm.

"And another thing," she said, alive.

Click.

"Why do I put up with this?" his voice cried, dead.

Click.

“I got lists you wouldn’t believe!” she cried, alive.

Sid glanced at me. “You?” he said.

“Me,” I said.

“How?” Sid said.

“I had your tapes from all those nights,” I said. “I cut them together, him talking, and put spaces between for her to yell back. Some places he just yells, no answer. Or she can click him off so she can yell, then click him back on.”

“How did you know—?”

“She was in the graveyard,” I said. “I couldn’t stand it. Her just talking to that cold piece of marble and no answers. So I recopied your tapes, just his raves and yells, and one late afternoon looking into the graveyard I saw that yes, she was there and might be there forever and starve and die being there. No answers.

But there had to be, even if you don’t listen or think you don’t, so I just walked in by the grave, turned on the tape, handed it to her where she sat by the stone, made sure he was yelling, and walked away. I didn’t look back or wait to hear if she yelled, too. Him and her, her and him, high and low, low and high, I just left.

“Last night she was back here on the bench, eating some cheesecake. I think she’s going to live. Isn’t that swell?”

Sid listened. The old man was complaining. “Why do I put up with this? Someone tell me! I’m waiting. So?”

“Okay, smartie,” the old woman cried.

Sid and I walked away in the late summer night. Her high voice and his deep voice faded.

Sid took my arm as we walked.

“For a goy,” he said, “you make a fine Jew. What can I do you for?”

“Pastrami on rye?” I said.

The end