

## The Cemetery (Or The Tombyard) Ray Bradbury

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IT HAD BECOME a familiar pattern by now. Every summer, on a certain July Sunday, they packed themselves into the open air Kissel and thundered out on quiet highways, down dirt roads and through woods to Green Ravine Rest, and here on every hand, as numerous as tenpins, lay relatives, aunts and cousins who had died at night, uncles who had died at high noon, fathers and mothers and sisters and brothers who had wanted to grow up to be firemen and nurses and now were nailed into packets and crossed with stones.

And always, starting four years back, Charles had run off, alone, among the horrified stones, frozen at what they represented, and he would fumble his fingers over the chiselled names, reading, with eyes shut, in silent Braille, whispering the name he touched: "B, A, N, G, L, Le, y. Bangley! Died 1924." And on and on, more names, more wanderings.

And four years ago he had happened on this one stone building in the ravine, tried the door, found it open, and entered into silence. Oh, how frightened had the aunts been, and the cousins scurrying to find him. But he had waited until he felt like it and come out, not telling where he'd hid. Saying he had simply run off. It meant a licking, but it was worth it.

He would hear them calling, far off in the tomb ravine, among the summer butterflies and the green moss echoes, shouting down the long throat of the underground tunnel, standing by the solemn, reflecting creek, hands up to mouths, calling, calling for him. And he would giggle, stifling his laughter inside, like corking water into a jug.

And he would run still further away from them, among the mushroom tombstones that grew up like bits of white cheese and moonstone in the shadows of the summer day. In this land of ravine silence, his feet pattered with the sound of rain along the soft paths of grass, and the further he ran, the more numerous the names on the stones became,

Belton, Sears, Roller, Smith, Brown, Davis, Braden, Jones. Lackel, Nixon, Merton, Beddoes, Spaulding. A land of names and silences. And far far away his mother and his father and his aunts and his cousins calling his name:

“Charles, Charles, Charles, Charlie, Charles!”

He stopped when he reached his particular tomb building, slipped wide the door with the broken lock and hurried in. It was a tomb like a wedding cake, fancifully ornate, impossible and lovely.

It had four windows facing the directions of the compass, looking out upon moss silence and weeping trees and fluttering water shelves that lowered themselves down a shadowed hill into the tunnel. Along the path now, like a string of white butterflies, flew the girl cousins, hair yellow on the air, eyes flashing.

“Charles, Charles, Charles, Charlie!”

And after them, more serious at the game than the children, came the tall aunts, their white skirts winging on the still air, panic making them begin to stumble and whirl about. “Charles!”

SIXTY SUMMERS burned the grass and sixty autumns plucked the trees to emptiness, and sixty winters froze the creek waters and cracked the toppling stones, while winds raced cold about, and sixty springs opened up new green meadows of color where butterflies were thick as flowers, and flowers as numerous as butterflies.

And then, one autumn afternoon, with the sky iron cold and the wind hurling tins of thunderous and invisible sound through the flying trees, an old woman edged along the path, peering here or there, alone, as delicate as chaff, as yellow as the last leaf.

She paused before the tomb building and nodded and sighed. She went to the long remembered window and peered in. Dust was thickened on the outside, and this she removed with her dainty flowered handkerchief, slowly and tremblingly.

And there was the small boy, leaned against the high sill, in the silent darkness, looking at her, looking out at silence and autumn hardness and the bare earth, and this old woman returned after so long. There was his head, like a dried fruit, and the fragile, timeworn arm and delicate fingers.

“Charles,” she said to the window, standing back. “Charlie. I thought of you today. For the first time in years. How long’s it been? Sixty years. I forgot all about you. After that first year.

I went to Philadelphia and forgot all about it. I thought it was only a dream. And I was married and had children and now my husband’s gone and I live alone, and I’m old, seventy years old now, Charles, and I was sitting in my house, for I came back to this only a year ago, and I looked at the sky this morning and suddenly I remembered. It was like a dream, I couldn’t believe it, so I had to come to be sure. And now I see it’s true, here you are. And I don’t know what to say.”  
The small child looked out through dust and glass.

“I’m sorry, Charlie, do you hear me, I’m sorry. It’s too late, but I’m sorry. But listen, Charles, listen. My life is over and it’s just as if it never was. When you’re seventy it’s like an instant. And now I’m here to where you were and have always been, and you shouldn’t be jealous and hate me, for it comes to all of us, and now it’s coming to me.”

The end