The Death Of So-and-so, Ray Bradbury

The Death Of So-and-so

IN THE ROOM, the deaths came and went. They were on all lips, and in every eye. Coffee cake went in and down to feed the stomach that kept the lungs busy with the talk of death. Coffee was creamed in cups and sugar sweetened the spell of old mortality in the parlor room.

The four people faced each other, eager with stories of who and how and why, with names, dates and figures, with conditions and fortitudes, with descriptions of agonies and midnight sweats, of sutures and fractures, of comas and trachomas.

Mrs. Hette lifted her fat well-fed hand with the coffee cake in it like the contents of a steam-shovel. She paused in the death agony of Mr. Joseph Lantry, her best friend. She widened her mouth, showed the gray gums of her false teeth, faintly rimed with a froth, and bit into that cake. Chewing, swallowing, her eyes ugly bright, she continued with each detail of Mr. Lantry's death.

He had spat blood upon the ground. He had coughed, making the noise of a chimney flue during a winter storm, vacuous and empty and horrible. He had had the red leaf of mortality across his cheeks.

Her voice went up, up. Then, with his death, she fell back in her chair, shaking her head, closing her eyes, not understanding life with her usual I-don't-understand-life voice. Raising her food to her mouth she rained clods and crumbs of earth and coffee cake down upon Mr. Lantry's coffin.

"Poor Mr. Lantry," said Mrs. Spaulding, across the dim room.
"Yes," said Mr. Spaulding.
"That's how it goes," said Mr. Hette, stirring his black coffee.

They all waited the proper interval. A little watch ticked inside Mrs. Hette; somehow she always knew the right interval before going on with something else. You had to lay the dead out properly, with words and silences, before you went on to the next, alphabetical or not. With a shuttering of eyes and a resting of hands about your coffee plate you showed that it was a subject of much solemnity and worry to you.

Mrs. Spaulding took advantage of the pause to offer more cake to everyone.

Mr. Hette sucked his pipe. “Do you know how long since we last seen you people? Twenty years. Traveling and all. When we hit town today we didn’t think we’d find you robbers alive!” Everybody laughed; it was nice to frost death up a bit. “What’s happened in town since we left?”

“Remember Bill Samuelson? He died.”
“What of?”
“Pneumonia,” said Mr. Spaulding.
“Diphtheria,” said Mrs. Spaulding.
Mr. Spaulding looked at Mr. Hette. “Helen Ferry, Tom Foley, Henry Masterson, all them died.”

“What ever happened to—ah—Alaine Phillips?” Mr. Hette looked cautiously from the corners of his eyes, at his wife. His wife’s eyes snapped.
“Alaine Phillips?” said Mr. Spaulding. “Why, didn’t you hear? She was divorced the spring after you married Lita here, and went away to Ohio.”
“Oh,” said Mr. Hette.

Mr. Hette’s wife glared at him.
“Alaine died the next year, however,” added Mr. Spaulding.
“What!” cried Mr. Hette.

Mrs. Hette smiled over at the wall briefly, taking out her hankie to tap her nose. The hankie made it hard for Mr. Hette to see her mouth now. He sat looking at the carpet.

Now the two women took up the brisk routine of names.

Gussie Soderstrom? Alive. Well! Berenice Holdridd? Dead. Well! Talita Martin? Dead! Really? There were gasps where ever someone had fallen away; little laughs and wonders where ever a tree still stood, leafed and healthy. Mildred Partridge! Lily Johnson? Elna Sundquist? Dead, dead, dead.

Mrs. Hette, in the person of one Sylvia Gamwell, wandered into a chain drug store, lifted pieces of poison cream pie to her mouth, went out to wait for a bus and dropped dead, necessitating an autopsy attended by Mr. Hette, and Mr. and Mrs. Spaulding.

All organs were minutely examined and found to be so heavily tainted with that kind of poison from cream pies left long in the sun, that the organs gave off a phosphorescent aura, like the breath of a dragon. Mrs. Hette's simulation of Miss Gamwell's death agony was something that brought everybody out to the edge of the sofa.

"It sure don't pay to eat in them chain drugs," snapped Mrs. Hette.
"I bake my own pies," said Mrs. Spaulding. "I'd rather die at home and take the blame!"

"Oh-ho." Mrs. Hette put coffee in on top of her laugh. "My friend Elma made up some pickle relish at home. One day she was happy about her Wedding on Saturday, ten days later her fiancé was courting a new girl and sending flowers out to Green Lawn Interment Park."
One of the men said, "How's business with you, Will?"
"Good even in bad years," said the other. "People got to smoke."

"Why, I got sick once just from drinking water," said Mrs. Hette. "Did you ever peek in a school microscope? In one water drop there's a million things. Every time you turn the kitchen faucet ten billion of them things drop out in your glass."

Now they were done with the actual deaths. The time of measurement was at hand. All of the live people in town would be weighed and found

wanting. Estimates would be given as to how long before Mr. Talmadge died, Nancy Gillette died, or Eleanor Swift passed on? Those three were all so much bone dry kindling, their mouths askew with palsy, their hands cool if they touched you.

They held Mr. Talmadge up, like the weight-guessing men at the carnival. “I’d say he’ll live to be—ah—live to be—well... seventy, no! seventy-five years old!” Mrs. Hette closed her eyes disdainfully. “My dear, he’ll fall downstairs one day and it’ll be like when you fling a light bulb against a wall. That’s him; brittle as that! He won’t live another six months. Neither will Nancy Gillette, I saw her today, too!”

They rushed on to the anonymous dead. Finishing estimates as to the death time of their own living friends, they hurried on to people who were dying all across the land.
Planes crashed in the parlor.

Trains toppled like timbers aflame. There were silent screams and tortures as the men sat idle-smoking their fresh-unwrapped cigars. Never ducking, the men sat flat-flanked in their chairs as cars splintered at their elbows and passengers were flung to hit the walls with soft, swift impact.

“Charred beyond recognition—”
“Crossing the tracks and she fell—Train ran over her—Picked her up in a basket—”
“Woman in Mellin Town—Husband came home—Found her in bed—Another man—Shot them and himself—”

While the women mingled their gasping breaths like perfumes, the men calmly carried out their direct, eye to eye, gray-frost talk of friends. “Remember Charlie Nesbitt who threw the burned mattress from the Clark Hotel at the Elk’s Convention? He died last year.” “Not old Charlie!” They stared at each other. “And here we are, still alive. Whatta you know?”

The women shuddered, clucked and laughed half-hysterically at what a world it was. They turned over several automobiles together, shook out the contents, examined them. They played detective, putting together a foully raped and dissected woman like a Chinese puzzle. After each subject they washed out their mouths with coffee and started fresh.

And finally, when the momentum died and the coffee pot was empty, they spiraled around and around to finally touch the subject to which they had been leading all through the autumn evening.

Themselves. How were they feeling?
Oh, Mrs. Hette still had her gallstones, but was bearing up.
Mrs. Spaulding was having her trouble too. She just knew she had stomach cancer. Was Mister Hette all right?
Mr. Hette's back bothered him.

Oh, Mr. Spaulding's back hurt him something awful, too. Some mornings he didn't rise until nine!
Well—Mrs. Hette smiled her triumph—Mr. Hette didn't get up until NOON!
"Of course," Mrs. Spaulding fixed her hair. "I imagine Leonard and I'll live to be old people. We've a good family record for it."
"So have we," said Mrs. Hette instantly.

Mrs. Spaulding ticked her fingers. "My mother died at eight-five, my father at ninety—"
"I thought you said he died at sixty-three?"
"Who?" Shrilly. "Father?" A laugh. "Ho, not him! Brisk as bacon at ninety!"
"Which one was it was an invalid from sixty on?"

"Invalid?" The blank surprise in Mrs. Spaulding's eyes. "Oh. You must mean cousin Wilma. Third cousin Wilma..."
"Now." Mrs. Hette moved her shoulders. "All my folks lived to be ninety. Same with Will's. We're liable to live a long, long time."
"I just hope we all have our health. It ain't no fun being old if you're sick. You'll be lucky if your gallstones don't kick up."

“I’m having them treated this month. And it’s a matter of time before Will’s back is cured. You ought to look into your cancer, also, Mrs.”
“Heavens, it isn’t cancer. Just gas, I know.”

They sat regarding each other, one eye no brighter than another, hair about the same grayness, wrinkles in like profusion; all balanced, mentally, physically. Not liking it.
“Well, it’s been nice.” Mrs. Hette got up suddenly, not looking at her hostess. “Hope when we come back to town in five years you’ll still be here.” A stiff smile.
“You just be sure you come back.” Drily.

The two men rose, smoking soft blue puffs of smoke, looking at each other with ancient soft warm eyes. They shook hands, slowly, tightly.
“Well, Will?” “Well, Leo?” A hesitation. “Come back some time.” They both looked at the floor. “If I don’t see you again, well—be good.”
“Same to you.”
“Lands, you’d think we were old, to hear you men talk!”

Everybody laughed. Coats were helped on, there was a hesitation and a number of farewells at the door, and some wavings when the Hette’s car finally drove off down the dark midnight street.

The walls of the living room were yellow with the nicotine given off by the talk of death. The entire house was dim, cut off from the world, all the air sucked out under great pressure. Mr. and Mrs. Spaulding walked about the parlor in a little solemn merry-go-round of emptying ash trays, clearing dishes, and turning out the lights.
Mr. Spaulding went up the stairs without a sound save a kind of old engine coughing. He was already in bed when his wife arrived, exhilarated, and got in. She lay half smiling, glowing, in the dark.

Finally, she heard him sigh.
“I feel terrible,” Leonard Spaulding said.
“Why?” she said.
“I don’t know,” he moaned. “I just don’t feel good. Depressed.”
“I’m sorry,” she said.

“You and that damned Mrs. Hette. Christ, what an evening. Will, he’s not so bad. But her and you. Christ, Christ, talk, talk!” He groaned in the dark room, all misery and ancient tiredness.
She tightened up. “We never have any one in any more.”
“We’re getting too old to have people in,” he cried, faintly. “There’s only one thing for old people to talk about, and you talked about it, by God, all evening!”
“Why, we didn’t—”

“Shut up,” he said, wearily, pleadingly, like a small withered child beside her. “I want to sleep.”

They both lay for five minutes in the dark. She turned away from him, cold, stiff, her eyelids tight clenched. And just before her anger at him seeped away and sleep flooded down all through her like a drenching of warm rain, she heard two faint far women’s voices talking one unto another, distantly, obscurely:
“My Will’s funeral was the finest the town ever had. Flowers? Thousands! I cried. People? Everyone in town!”—“Well, you should have been at Leonard’s funeral service. He looked so fine and natural, just like he was asleep. And flowers? Land! Banked around and banked around, and people!” — “Well, Will’s service was” — “They sang ‘Beautiful Isle of Somewhere.’” — “—people—” — “—flowers and—” — “—singing—”

The warm rain pattered over her. She slept.

The end