

The Leave-Taking, Ray Bradbury

The Leave-Taking

She was a woman with a broom or a dustpan or a washrag or a mixing spoon in her hand. You saw her cutting piecrust in the morning, humming to it, or you saw her setting out the baked pies at noon or taking them in, cool, at dusk.

She rang porcelain cups like a Swiss bell ringer, to their place. She glided through the halls as steadily as a vacuum machine, seeking, finding, and setting to rights. She made mirrors of every window, to catch the sun. She strolled but twice through any garden, trowel in hand, and the flowers raised their quivering fires upon the warm air in her wake.

She slept quietly and turned no more than three times in a night, as relaxed as a white glove to which, at dawn, a brisk hand will return. Waking, she touched people like pictures, to set their frames straight.

But, now...?

'Grandma,' said everyone. 'Great-grandma.'

Now it was as if a huge sum in arithmetic were finally drawing to an end. She had stuffed turkeys, chickens, squabs, gentlemen, and boys. She had washed ceilings, walls, invalids, and children. She had laid linoleum, repaired bicycles, wound clocks, stoked furnaces, swabbed iodine on ten thousand grievous wounds.

Her hands had flown all around about and down, gentling this, holding that, throwing baseballs, swinging bright croquet mallets, seeding black earth, or fixing covers over dumplings, ragouts, and children wildly strewn by slumber.

She had pulled down shades, pinched out candles, turned switches, and—grown old. Looking back on thirty billions of things started, carried, finished and done, it all summed up, totaled out; the last decimal was placed, the final zero swung slowly into line. Now, chalk in hand, she stood back from life a silent hour before reaching for the eraser.

‘Let me see now,’ said Great-grandma. ‘Let me see...’

With no fuss or further ado, she traveled the house in an ever-circling inventory, reached the stairs at last, and, making no special announcement, she took herself up three flights to her room where, silently, she laid herself out like a fossil imprint under the snowing cool sheets of her bed and began to die.

Again the voices:

‘Grandma! Great-grandma!’

The rumor of what she was doing dropped down the stairwell, hit, and spread ripples through the rooms, out doors and windows and along the street of elms to the edge of the green ravine.

‘Here now, here!’

The family surrounded her bed.

‘Just let me lie,’ she whispered.

Her ailment could not be seen in any microscope: it was a mild but ever-deepening tiredness, a dim weighing of her sparrow body; sleepy, sleepier, sleepest.

As for her children and her children’s children—it seemed impossible that with such a simple act, the most leisurely act in the world, she could cause such apprehension.

‘Great-grandma, now listen—what you’re doing is no better than breaking a lease. This house will fall down without you. You must give us at least a year’s notice!’

Great-grandma opened one eye. Ninety years gazed calmly out at her physicians like a dust-ghost from a high cupola window in a fast-emptying house. ‘Tom...?’

The boy was sent, alone, to her whispering bed.

‘Tom,’ she said, faintly, far away, ‘in the Southern Seas there’s a day in each man’s life when he knows it’s time to shake hands with all his friends and say good-bye and sail away, and he does, and it’s natural—it’s just his time.’

That’s how it is today. I’m so like you sometimes, sitting through Saturday matinees until nine at night when we send your dad to bring you home.

Tom, when the time comes that the same cowboys are shooting the same Indians on the same mountaintop, then it’s best to fold back the seat and head for the door, with no regrets and no walking backward up the aisle.

So, I’m leaving while I’m still happy and still entertained.’

Douglas was summoned next to her side.

‘Grandma, who’ll shingle the roof next spring?’

Every April for as far back as there were calendars, you thought you heard woodpeckers tapping the housetop. But no, it was Great-grandma, somehow transported, singing, pounding nails, replacing shingles, high in the sky!

‘Douglas,’ she whispered, ‘don’t ever let anyone do the shingles unless it’s fun for them.’

‘Yes’m.’

'Look around come April, and say, "Who'd like to fix the roof?" And whichever face lights up is the face you want, Douglas.

Because up there on that roof you can see the whole town going toward the country and the country going toward the edge of the earth and the river shining, and the morning lake, and birds on the trees down under you, and the best of the wind all around above.

Any one of those should be enough to make a person climb a weather vane some spring sunrise. It's a powerful hour, if you give it half a chance...'

Her voice sank to a soft flutter.
Douglas was crying.

She roused herself again. 'Now, why are you doing that?'
'Because,' he said, 'you won't be here tomorrow.'

She turned a small hand-mirror from herself to the boy. He looked at her face and himself in the mirror and then at her face again as she said, 'Tomorrow morning I'll get up at seven and wash behind my ears: I'll run to church with Charlie Woodman: I'll picnic at Electric Park; I'll swim, run barefoot, fall out of trees, chew spearmint gum...Douglas, Douglas, for shame! You cut your fingernails, don't you?'

'Yes'm.'

'And you don't yell when your body makes itself over every seven years or so, old cells dead and new ones added to your fingers and your heart. You don't mind that, do you?'

'No'm.'

'Well, consider then, boy. Any man saves fingernail clippings is a fool. You ever see a snake bother to keep his peeled skin? That's about all you got here today in this bed is fingernails and snake skin.

One good breath would send me up in flakes. Important thing is not the me that's lying here, but the me that's sitting on the edge of the bed looking back at me, and the me that's downstairs cooking supper, or out in the garage under the car, or in the library reading.

All the new parts, they count. I'm not really dying today. No person ever died that had a family. I'll be around a long time. A thousand years from now a whole township of my offspring will be biting sour apples in the gumwood shade. That's my answer to anyone asks big questions! Quick now, send in the rest!

At last the entire family stood, like people seeing someone off at the rail station, waiting in the room.

'Well,' said Great-grandma, 'there I am. I'm not humble, so it's nice seeing you standing around my bed. Now next week there's late gardening and closet-cleaning and clothes-buying for the children to do.

And since that part of me which is called, for convenience, Great-grandma, won't be here to step it along, those other parts of me called Uncle Bert and Leo and Tom and Douglas, and all the other names, will have to take over, each to his own.'

'Yes, Grandma.'

'I don't want any Hallowe'en parties here tomorrow. Don't want anyone saying anything sweet about me; I said it all in my time and my pride. I've tasted every victual and danced every dance; now there's one last tart I haven't bit on, one tune I haven't whistled. But I'm not afraid. I'm truly curious.

Death won't get a crumb by my mouth I won't keep and savor. So don't you worry over me. Now, all of you go, and let me find my sleep...'

Somewhere a door closed quietly.

'That's better.' Alone, she snuggled luxuriously down through the warm snowbank of linen and wool, sheet and cover, and the colors of the patchwork quilt were bright as the circus banners of old time. Lying there, she felt as small and secret as on those mornings eighty-some-odd years ago when, wakening, she comforted her tender bones in bed.

A long time back, she thought, I dreamed a dream, and was enjoying it so much when someone wakened me, and that was the day when I was born. And now? Now, let me see...She cast her mind back.

Where was I? she thought. Ninety years...how to take up the thread and the pattern of that lost dream again? She put out a small hand.

There...Yes, that was it. She smiled. Deeper in the warm snow hill she turned her head upon her pillow.

That was better. Now, yes, now she saw it shaping in her mind quietly, and with a serenity like a sea moving along an endless and self-refreshing shore.

Now she let the old dream touch and lift her from the snow and drift her above the scarce-remembered bed.

Downstairs, she thought, they are polishing the silver, and rummaging the cellar, and dusting in the halls. She could hear them living all through the house.

'It's all right,' whispered Great-grandma, as the dream floated her. 'Like everything else in this life, it's fitting.'

And the sea moved her back down the shore.

The end