



The Sunset Harp, Ray Bradbury

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TOM, knee-deep in the waves, a piece of driftwood in his hand, listened.

The house, up towards the Coast Highway in the late afternoon, was silent. The sounds of closets being rummaged, suitcase locks snapping, vases being smashed, and of a final door crashing shut, all had faded away.

Chico, standing on the pale sand, flourished his wire-strainer to shake out a harvest of lost coins. After a moment, without glancing at Tom, he said, 'Let her go.'

So it was every year. For a week or a month, their house would have music swelling from the windows, there would be new geraniums potted on the porch-rail, new paint on the doors and steps.

The clothes on the wire-line changed from harlequin pants to sheath-dresses to handmade Mexican frocks like white waves breaking behind the house. Inside, the paintings on the walls shifted from imitation Matisse to pseudo-Italian Renaissance.

Sometimes, looking up, he would see a woman drying her hair like a bright yellow flag on the wind. Sometimes the flag was black or red. Sometimes the woman was tall, sometimes short, against the sky. But there was never more than one woman at a time. And, at last, a day like today came....

Tom placed his driftwood on the growing pile near where Chico sifted the billion footprints left by people long vanished from their holidays.

'Chico. What are we doing here?'

'Living the life of Reilly, boy!'

'I don't feel like Reilly, Chico.'

'Work at it, boy!'

Tom saw the house a month from now, the flower-pots blowing dust, the walls hung with empty squares, only sand carpeting the floors. The rooms would echo like shells in the wind. And all night every night bedded in separate rooms he and Chico would hear a tide falling away and away down a long shore, leaving no trace.

Tom nodded, imperceptibly. Once a year he himself brought a nice girl here, knowing she was right at last and that in no time they would be married. But his women always stole silently away before dawn, feeling they had been mistaken for someone else, not being able to play the part.

Chico's friends left like vacuum-cleaners, with a terrific drag, roar, rush, leaving no lint unturned, no clam unprized of its pearl, taking their purses with them like toy-dogs which Chico had petted as he opened their jaws to count their teeth.

'That's four women so far this year.'

'Okay, referee.' Chico grinned. 'Show me the way to the showers.'

'Chico –' Tom bit his lower lip, then went on. 'I been thinking. Why don't we split up?'

Chico just looked at him.

'I mean,' said Tom, quickly, 'maybe we'd have better luck, alone.'

'Well, I'll be goddamned,' said Chico, slowly, gripping the strainer in his big fists before him. 'Look here, boy, don't you know the facts? You and me, we'll be here come the year 2,000.'

A couple of crazy dumb old gooney-birds drying their bones in the sun. Nothing's ever going to happen to us now, Tom, it's too late. Get that through your head and shut up.'

Tom swallowed and looked steadily at the other man. 'I'm thinking of leaving – next week.'

'Shut up, shut up, and get to work!'

Chico gave the sand an angry showering rake that tilled him forty-three cents in dimes, pennies, and nickels. He stared blindly at the coins shimmering down the wires like a pinball game all afire.

Tom did not move, holding his breath.

They both seemed to be waiting for something.

The something happened.

'Hey ... hey ... hey ...'

From a long way off down the coast a voice called.

The two men turned slowly.

'Hey ... hey ... oh, hey ...!'

A boy was running, yelling, waving, along the shore two hundred yards away. There was something in his voice that made Tom feel suddenly cold. He held on to his own arms, waiting.

'Hey!'

The boy pulled up, gasping, pointing back along the shore.

'A woman, a funny woman, by the North Rock!'

'A woman!' The words exploded from Chico's mouth and he began to laugh. 'Oh, no, no!'

'What you mean, a "funny" woman?' asked Tom.

'I don't know,' cried the boy, his eyes wide. 'You got to come see! Awful funny!'

'You mean "drowned"?'

'Maybe! She came out of the water, she's lying on the shore, you got to see, yourself ... funny ...' The boy's voice died. He gazed off north again.

'She's got a fish's tail.'

Chico laughed. 'Not before supper, please.'

'Please!' cried the boy, dancing now. 'No lie! Oh, hurry!'

He ran off, sensed he was not followed, and looked back in dismay.

Tom felt his lips move. 'Boy wouldn't run this far for a joke, would he, Chico?'

‘People have run farther for less.’
Tom started walking. ‘All right, son.’
‘Thanks, mister, oh thanks!’

The boy ran. Twenty yards up the coast, Tom looked back. Behind him, Chico squinted, shrugged, dusted his hands wearily, and followed.

They moved north along the twilight beach, their skin weathered in tiny lizard folds about their burnt pale-water eyes, looking younger for their hair cut close to the skull so you could not see the grey. There was a fair wind and the ocean rose and fell with prolonged concussions.

‘What,’ said Tom, ‘what if we get to North Rock and it’s true? The ocean has washed some thing up?’

But before Chico could answer Tom was gone, his mind racing down coasts Uttered with horseshoe crabs, sand-dollars, starfish, kelp, and stone. From all the times he’d talked on what lives in the sea, the names returned with the breathing fall of waves.

Argonauts, they whispered, codlings, pollacks, hound-fish, tautog, tench, sea-elephant, they whispered, gillings, flounders, and beluga, the white whale and grampus, the sea-dog ... always you thought how these must look from their deep-sounding names.

Perhaps you would never in your life see them rise from the salt meadows beyond the safe limits of the shore, but they were there, and their names, with a thousand others, made pictures. And you looked and wished you were a frigate-bird that might fly nine thousand miles around to return some year with the full size of the ocean in your head.

‘Oh, quick!’ The boy had run back to peer in Tom’s face. ‘It might be gone!’

‘Keep your shirt on, boy,’ said Chico.

They came around the North Rock. A second boy stood there, looking down.

Perhaps from the corner of his eye, Tom saw something on the sand that made him hesitate to look straight at it, but fix instead on the face of the boy standing there. The boy was pale and he seemed not to breathe. On occasion he remembered to take a breath, his eyes focused, but the more they saw there on the sand the more they took time off from focusing and turned blank and looked stunned. When the ocean came in over his tennis shoes, he did not move or notice.

Tom glanced away from the boy to the sand.

And Tom's face, in the next moment, became the face of the boy. His hands assumed the same curl at his sides and his mouth moved to open and stay half-open and his eyes, which were light in colour, seemed to bleach still more with so much looking.

The setting sun was ten minutes above the sea.

'A big wave came in and went out,' said the first boy, 'and here she was.'

They looked at the woman lying there.

Her hair was very long and it lay on the beach like the threads of an immense harp. The water stroked along the threads and floated them up and let them down, each time in a different fan and silhouette. The hair must have been five or six feet long and now it was strewn on the hard wet sand and it was the colour of limes.

Her face ...

The men bent half down in wonder.

Her face was white sand sculpture, with a few water drops shimmering on it like summer rain upon a cream-coloured rose. Her face was that moon which when seen by day is pale and unbelievable in the blue sky.

It was milk-marble veined with faint violet in the temples. The eyelids, closed down upon the eyes, were powdered with a faint water-colour, as if the eyes beneath gazed through the fragile tissue of the lids and saw them standing there above her looking down and looking down.

The mouth was a pale flushed sea-rose, full and closed upon itself. And her neck was slender and white and her breasts were small and white, now covered, uncovered, covered, uncovered in the flow of water, the ebb of water, the flow, the ebb, the flow.

And the breasts were flushed at their tips, and her body was startlingly white, almost an illumination, a white-green lightning against the sand. And as the water shifted her, her skin glinted like the surface of a pearl.

The lower half of her body changed itself from white to very pale blue, from very pale blue to pale green, from pale green to emerald green, to moss and lime green, to scintillas and sequins all dark green, all flowing away in a fount, a curve, a rush of light and dark, to end in a lacy fan, a spread of foam and jewel on the sand.

The two halves of this creature were so joined as to reveal no point of fusion where pearl woman, woman of a whiteness made of cream-water and clear sky merged with that half which belonged to the amphibious slide and rush of current that came up on the shore and shelved down the shore, tugging its half towards its proper home.

The woman was the sea, the sea was woman. There was no flaw, or seam, no wrinkle or stitch; the illusion, if illusion it was, held perfectly together and the blood from one moved into and through and mingled with what must have been the ice-waters of the other.

‘I wanted to run get help.’ The first boy seemed not to want to raise his voice. ‘But Skip said she was dead and there’s no help for that. Is she?’

‘She was never alive,’ said Chico. ‘Sure,’ he went on, feeling their eyes on him suddenly. ‘It’s something left over from a movie-studio. Liquid rubber skinned over a steel frame. A prop, a dummy.’

‘Oh, no, it’s real!’

‘We’ll find a label somewhere,’ said Chico. ‘Here.’

‘Don’t!’ cried the first boy.

‘Hell.’ Chico touched the body to turn it, and stopped. He knelt there, his face changing.

'What's the matter?' asked Tom.

Chico took his hand away and looked at it. 'I was wrong.' His voice faded.

Tom took the woman's wrist. 'There's a pulse.'

'You're feeling your own heartbeat.'

'I just don't know ... maybe ... maybe ...'

The woman was there and her upper body was all moon pearl and tidal cream and her lower body all slithering ancient green-black coins that slid upon themselves in the shift of wind and water.

'There's a trick somewhere!' cried Chico, suddenly.

'No. No!' Just as suddenly Tom burst in laughter. 'No trick! My God, my God, I feel great! I haven't felt so great since I was a kid!'

They walked slowly around her. A wave touched her white hand so the fingers faintly softly waved. The gesture was that of someone asking for another and another wave to come in and lift the fingers and then the wrist and then the arm and then the head and finally the body and take all of them together back down out to sea.

Tom.' Chico's mouth opened and closed. 'Why don't you go get our truck?'

Tom didn't move.

'You hear me?' said Chico.

'Yes, but –'

'But what? We could sell this somewhere, I don't know – the university, that aquarium at Seal Beach or ... well, hell, why couldn't we just set up a place? Look.' He shook Tom's arm. 'Drive to the pier. Buy us three hundred pounds of chipped ice. When you take anything out of the water you need ice, don't you?'

'I never thought.'

'Think about it! Get moving!'

'I don't know, Chico.'

'What do you mean? She's real, isn't she?' He turned to the boys. 'You say she's real, don't you? Well, then, what are we waiting for?'

'Chico,' said Tom. 'You better go get the ice yourself.'

'Someone's got to stay and make sure she don't go back out with the tide!'

'Chico,' said Tom. 'I don't know how to explain. I don't want to get that ice for you.'

'I'll go myself, then. Look, boys, build the sand up here to keep the waves back. I'll give you five bucks apiece. Hop to it!'

The sides of the boys' faces were bronze-pink from the sun which was touching the horizon now. Their eyes were a bronze colour looking at Chico.

'My God!' said Chico. 'This is better than finding ambergris!' He ran to the top of the nearest dune, called, 'Get to work!' and was gone.

Now Tom and the two boys were left with the lonely woman by the North Rock and the sun was one-fourth of the way below the western horizon. The sand and the woman were pink-gold.

'Just a little line,' whispered the second boy. He drew his fingernail along under his own chin, gently. He nodded to the woman. Tom bent again to see the faint line under either side of her firm white chin, the small, almost invisible line where the gills were or had been and were now almost sealed shut, invisible.

He looked at the face and the great strands of hair spread out in a lyre on the shore.

'She's beautiful,' he said.

The boys nodded without knowing it.

Behind them, a gull leaped up quickly from the dunes. The boys gasped and turned to stare.

Tom felt himself trembling. He saw the boys were trembling too. A car horn hooted. Their eyes blinked, suddenly afraid. They looked up towards the highway.

A wave poured about the body, framing it in a clear white pool of water.

Tom nodded the boys to one side.

The wave moved the body an inch in and two inches out towards the sea.

The next wave came and moved the body two inches in and six inches out towards the sea.

'But –' said the first boy.

Tom shook his head.

The third wave lifted the body two feet down towards the sea. The wave after that drifted the body another foot down the shingles and the next three moved it six feet down.

The first boy cried out and ran after it.

Tom reached him and held his arm. The boy looked helpless and afraid and sad.

For a moment there were no more waves. Tom looked at the woman, thinking, she's true, she's real, she's mine ... but ... she's dead. Or will be if she stays here.

'We can't let her go,' said the first boy. 'We can't, we just can't!'

The other boy stepped between the woman and the sea. 'What would we do with her?' he wanted to know, looking at Tom, 'if we kept her?'

The first boy tried to think. 'We could – we could –' He stopped and shook his head. 'Oh, my Gosh.'

The second boy stepped out of the way and left a path from the woman to the sea.

The next wave was a big one. It came in and went out and the sand was empty. The whiteness was gone and the black diamonds and the great threads of the harp.

They stood by the edge of the sea, looking out, the man and the two boys, until they heard the truck driving up on the dunes behind them. The last of the sun was gone.

They heard footsteps running down the dunes and someone yelling.

They drove back down the darkening beach in the light truck with the big-treaded tyres, in silence. The two boys sat in the rear on the bags of chipped ice. After a long while, Chico began to swear steadily, half to himself, spitting out of the window.

‘Three hundred pounds of ice. Three hundred pounds of ice! What do I do with it now? And I’m soaked to the skin, soaked! You didn’t even move when I jumped in and swam out to look around! Idiot, idiot! You haven’t changed! Like every other time, like always, you do nothing, nothing, just stand there, stand there, do nothing, nothing, just stare!’

‘And what did you do, I ask, what?’ said Tom, in a tired voice, looking ahead. ‘The same as you always did, just the same, no different, no different at all. You should’ve seen yourself.’

They dropped the boys off at their beach-house. The youngest spoke in a voice you could hardly hear against the wind. ‘Gosh, nobody’ll ever believe ...’

The two men drove down the coast and parked.

Chico sat for two or three minutes waiting for his fist to relax on his lap, and then he snorted.

‘Hell. I guess things turn out for the best.’ He took a deep breath. ‘It just came to me. Funny. Twenty, thirty years from now, middle of the night, our phone’ll ring. It’ll be one of those two boys, grown-up, calling long-distance from a bar somewhere. Middle of the night, them calling to ask one question. It’s true, isn’t it? they’ll say. It did happen, didn’t it?’

Back in 1958, it really happened to us? And we’ll sit there on the edge of the bed, middle of the night, saying, Sure, boy, sure, it really happened to us in 1958. And they’ll say, Thanks, and we’ll say, Don’t

mention it, any old time. And we'll all say good night. And maybe they won't call again for a couple of years.'

The two men sat on their front-porch steps in the dark.

'Tom?'

'What?'

Chico waited a moment.

'Tom, next week – you're not moving out.'

Tom thought about it, a cigarette dead in his fingers. And he knew he would never go away now. For tomorrow and the day after and the day after the day after that, he knew he would walk down and go swimming there in all the green lace and the white fires and the dark caverns in the hollows under the waves. Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow.

'That's right, Chico. I'm staying here.'

Now the silver looking-glasses advanced in a crumpling line all along the coast from a thousand miles north to a thousand miles south. The mirrors did not reflect so much as one building or one tree or one highway or one car or even one man himself.

The mirrors reflected only the quiet moon and then shattered into a billion bits of glass that spread out in a glaze on the shore. Then the sea was dark awhile, preparing another line of mirrors to rear up and surprise the two men who sat there for a long time, never once blinking their eyes, waiting.

The end