



The Time of Going Away, Ray Bradbury

The Time of Going Away

THE thought was three days and three nights growing. During the days he carried it like a ripening peach in his head. During the nights he let it take flesh and sustenance, hung out on the silent air, coloured by country moon and country stars. He walked around and around the thought in the silence before dawn. On the fourth morning he reached up an invisible hand, picked it, and swallowed it whole.

He arose as swiftly as possible and burned all his old letters, packed a few clothes in a very small case, and put on his mid-night suit and a tie the shiny colour of ravens' feathers, as if he were in mourning. He sensed his wife in the door behind him watching his little play with the eyes of a critic who may leap onstage any moment and stop the show. When he brushed past her, he murmured, 'Excuse me.'

'Excuse me!' she cried. 'Is that all you say? Creeping around here, planning a trip!'

'I didn't plan it; it happened,' he said. 'Three days ago I got this premonition. I knew I was going to die.'

'Stop that kind of talk,' she said. 'It makes me nervous.'

The horizon was mirrored softly in his eyes. 'I hear my blood running slow. Listening to my bones is like standing in an attic hearing the beams shift and the dust settle.'

'You're only seventy-five,' said his wife. 'You stand on your own two legs, see, hear, eat, and sleep good, don't you? What's all this talk?'

'It's the natural tongue of existence speaking to me,' said the old man. 'Civilization's got us too far away from our natural selves. Now you take the pagan islanders — '

'I won't!'

'Everyone knows the pagan islanders get a feel for when it's time to die. They walk around shaking hands with friends and give away all their earthly goods — '

'Don't their wives have a say?'

'They give some of their earthly goods to their wives.'

'I should think so!'

'And some to their friends — '

'I'll argue that!'

'And some to their friends. Then they paddle their canoes off into the sunset and never return.'

His wife looked high up along him as if he were timber ripe for cutting.

'Desertion!' she said.

'No, no, Mildred; death, pure and simple. The Time of Going Away, they call it.'

'Did anyone ever charter a canoe and follow to see what those fools were up to?'

'Of course not,' said the old man, mildly irritated. 'That would spoil everything.'

'You mean they had other wives and pretty friends off on another island?'

'No, no, it's just a man needs aloneness, serenity, when his juices turn cold.'

'If you could prove those fools really died, I'd shut up.' His wife squinted one eye. 'Anyone ever find their bones on those far islands?'

'The fact is that they just sail into the sunset like animals who sense the Great Time at hand. Beyond that, I don't wish to know.'

'Well, I know,' said the old woman. 'You been reading more articles in the National Geographic about the Elephant Bone-yard.'

'Graveyard, not Boneyard!' he shouted.

'Graveyard, Boneyard. I thought I burned those magazines; you got some hid?'

'Look here, Mildred,' he said severely, seizing the suitcase again. 'My mind points north; nothing you say can head me south. I'm tuned to the infinite secret wellspring of the primi-tive soul.'

'You're tuned to whatever you read last in that bog-trotters' gazette!'

She pointed a finger at him. 'You think I got no memory?'

His shoulders fell. 'Let's not go through the list again, please.'

'What about the Hairy Mammoth episode?' she asked. 'When they found that frozen elephant in the Russian tundra thirty years back? You and Sam Hertz, that old fool, with your fine idea of running off to Siberia to corner the world market in canned edible hairy mammoth? You think I don't still hear you saying, "Imagine the prices members of the National Geo-graphic Society will pay to have the tender meat of the Siberian hairy mammoth, ten thousand years old, ten thousand years ex-tinct, right in their homes!" You think my scars have healed from that?'

'I see them clearly,' he said.

'You think I've forgotten the time you went out to find the Lost Tribe of the Osseos, or whatever, in Wisconsin some place where you could dogtrot to town Saturday nights and tank up, and fell in that quarry and broke your leg and laid there three nights?'

'Your recall,' he said, 'is total.'

'Then what's this about pagan natives and the Time of Going Away? I'll tell you what it is — it's the Time of Staying at Home! It's the time when fruit don't fall off the trees into your hand, you got to walk to the store for it. And why do we walk to the store for it? Someone in this house, I'll name no names, took the car apart like a clock some years back and left it strewn all down the yard.

I've raised auto parts in my garden ten years come Thursday. Ten more years and all that's left of our car is little heaps of rust. Look out that window! It's leaf-raking-and-burning time. It's chopping-trees-and-sawing-wood-for-the-fire time. It's clean-out-stoves-and-hang-storm-doors-and-windows time. It's shingle-the-roof time, that's what it is, and if you think you're out to escape it, think again!'

He placed his hand to his chest. 'It pains me you have so little trust in my natural sensitivity to oncoming Doom.'

'It pains me that National Geographies fall in the hands of crazy old men. I see you read those pages then fall into those dreams I always

have to sweep up after. Those Geographic and Popular Mechanics publishers should be forced to see all the half-finished rowboats, helicopters, and one-man batwing gliders in our attic, garage, and cellar. Not only see, but cart them home!

'Chatter on,' he said. 'I stand before you, a white stone sinking in the tides of Oblivion. For God's sake, woman, can't I drag myself off to die in peace?'

'Plenty of time for Oblivion when I find you stone cold across the kindling pile.'

'Jesting Pilate!' he said. 'Is recognition of one's own mortality nothing but vanity?'

'You're chewing it like a plug of tobacco.'

'Enough!' he said. 'My earthly goods are stacked on the back porch. Give them to the Salvation Army.'

'The Geographics too?'

'Yes, damn it, the Geographics! Now stand aside!'

'If you're going to die, you won't need that suitcase full of clothing,' she said.

'Hands off, woman! It may take some few hours. Am I to be stripped of my last creature comforts? This should be a tender scene of parting. Instead — bitter recriminations, sarcasm, doubt strewn to every wind.'

'All right,' she said. 'Go spend a cold night in the woods.'

'I'm not necessarily going to the woods.'

'Where else is there for a man in Illinois to go to die?'

'Well,' he said, and paused. 'Well, there's always the open highway.'

'And be run down, of course; I'd forgotten that.'

'No, no!' He squeezed his eyes shut, then opened them again. 'The empty side-roads leading nowhere, everywhere, through night forests, wilderness, to distant lakes . . . '

'Now, you're not going to go rent a canoe, are you, and paddle off? Remember the time you tipped over and almost drowned at Fireman's Pier?'

'Who said anything about canoes?'

'You did! Pagan islanders, you said, paddling off into the great unknown.'

'That's the South Seas! Here a man has to strike off on foot to find his natural source, seek his natural end. I might walk north along the Lake Michigan shore, the dunes, the wind, the big breakers there.'

'Willie, Willie,' she said softly, shaking her head. 'Oh, Willie, Willie, what will I do with you?'

He lowered his voice. 'Just let me have my head,' he said.

'Yes,' she said, quietly. 'Yes.' And tears came to her eyes.

'Now, now,' he said.

'Oh, Willie . . . ' She looked a long while at him. 'Do you really think with all your heart you're not going to live?'

He saw himself reflected, small but perfect, in her eye, and looked away uneasily. 'I thought all night about the universal tide that brings man in and takes him out. Now it's morning and good-bye.'

'Good-bye?' She looked as if she'd never heard the word before. His voice was unsteady. 'Of course, if you absolutely insist I stay, Mildred — '

'No!' She braced herself and blew her nose. 'You feel what you feel; I can't fight that!'

'You sure?' he said.

'You're the one that's sure, Willie,' she said. 'Get on along now. Take your heavy coat; the nights are cold.'

'But — ' he said.

She ran and brought his coat and kissed his cheek and drew back quickly before he could enclose her in his bear hug. He stood there

working his mouth, gazing at the big armchair by the fire. She threw open the front door. 'You got food?'

'I won't need . . . ' He paused. 'I got a boiled-ham sandwich and some pickles in my case. Just one. That's all I figured I'd . . . '

And then he was out the door and down the steps and along the path towards the woods. He turned and was going to say-something but thought better of it, waved, and went on.

'Now, Will,' she called. 'Don't overdo. Don't make too much distance the first hour! You get tired, sit down! You get hungry, eat! And . . . ' But here she had to stop and turn away and get out her hand-kerchief.

A moment later, she looked up the path and it looked as though nobody had passed there in the last ten thousand years. It was so empty she had to go in and shut the door.

Night-time, nine o'clock, nine-fifteen, stars out, moon round, house lights strawberry-coloured through the curtains, the chimney blowing long comet tails of fireworks, sighing warm. Down the chimney, sounds of pots and pans and cutlery, fire on the hearth, like a great orange cat. In the kitchen, the big iron cook-stove full of jumping flames, pans boiling, bubbling, frying, vapours, and steams in the air. From time to time the old woman turned and her eyes listened and her mouth listened, wide, to the world outside this house, this fire, and this food.

Nine-thirty and, from a great distance away from the house, a solid whacking, chunking sound.

The old woman straightened up and laid down a spoon.

Outside, the dull solid blows came again and again in the moonlight. The sound went on for three or four minutes, during which she hardly moved except to tighten her mouth or her fists with each solid chunking blow. When the sounds stopped, she threw herself at the stove, the table, stirring, pouring, lift-ing, carrying, setting down. She finished just as new sounds came from the dark land out-side the windows. Footsteps came slowly up the path, heavy shoes weighed the front porch.

She went to the door and waited for a knock.

None came.

She waited a full minute.

Outside on the porch a great bulk stirred and shifted from side to side uneasily.

Finally she sighed and called sharply at the door. 'Will, is that you breathing out there?'

No answer. Only a kind of sheepish silence behind the door.

She snatched the door wide.

The old man stood there, an incredible stack of cordwood in his arms.

His voice came from behind the stack.

'Saw smoke in the chimney; figured you might need wood,' he said.

She stood aside. He came in and placed the wood carefully by the hearth, not looking at her.

She looked out on the porch and picked up the suitcase and brought it in and shut the door.

She saw him sitting at the dinner table.

She stirred the soup on the stove to a great boiling whirl.

'Roast beef in the oven?' he asked quietly.

She opened the oven door. The steam breathed across the room to wrap him up. He closed his eyes, seated there, bathed.

'What's that other smell, the burning?' he asked a moment later.

She waited, back turned, and finally said, 'National Geo-graphics'

He nodded slowly, saying nothing.

Then the food was on the table, warm and tremorous, and there was a moment of silence after she sat down and looked at him. She shook her head. She looked at him. Then she shook her head again silently.

'Do you want to ask the blessing?' she said.

'You,' he said.

They sat there in the warm room by the bright fire and bowed their heads and closed their eyes. She smiled and began.

'Thank you, Lord . . . '

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The end