



To The Chicago Abyss, Ray Bradbury

To The Chicago Abyss, Ray Bradbury (1963)

Under a pale April sky in a faint wind that blew out of memory of winter, the old man shuffled into the almost empty park at noon. His slow feet were bandaged with nicotine-stained swathes, his hair was wild, long and gray as was his beard which enclosed a mouth which seemed always atremble with revelation.

Now he gazed back as if he had lost so many things he could not begin to guess there in the tumbled ruin, the toothless skyline of the city.

Finding nothing, he shuffled on until he found a bench where sat a woman alone. Examining her, he nodded and sat to the far end of the bench and did not look at her again.

He remained, eyes shut, mouth working, for three minutes, head moving as if his nose were printing a single word on the air. Once it was written, he opened his mouth to pronounce it in a clear, fine voice: "Coffee."

The woman gasped and stiffened. The old man's gnarled fingers tumbled in pantomime on his unseen lap. "Twist the key! Bright-red, yellow-letter can! Compressed air. Hisss! Vacuum pack. Ssst! Like a snake!" The woman snapped her head about as if slapped, to stare in dreadful fascination at the old man's moving tongue. "The scent, the odor, the smell. Rich, dark, wondrous Brazilian beans, fresh-ground!"

The woman tottered, sprung up, reeling as if gun-shot. The old man flicked his eyes wide. "No!" But she was running, gone. The old man sighed and walked on through the park until he reached a bench where sat a young man completely involved with wrapping dried grass in a small square of thin paper.

His thin fingers shaped the grass tenderly, in an almost holy ritual, trembling as he rolled the tube, put it to his mouth and, hypnotically, lit

it. He leaned back, squinting deliciously, communing with the strange rank air in his mouth and lungs.

The old man watched the smoke blow away on the wind and said, "Chesterfields."

The young man gripped his knees tight.

"Raleighs," said the old man. "Lucky Strikes." The young man stared at him. "Kent. Kool. Marlboro," said the old man, not looking at him.

"Those were the names. White, red, amber packs, grass green, sky blue, pure gold, with the red slick small ribbon that ran around the top that you pulled to zip away the crinkly cellophane, and the blue government tax stamp---"

"Shut up," said the young man.

"Buy them in drugstores, fountains, subways--"

"Shut up!"

"Gently," said the old man . "It's just, that smoke of yours made me think--"

"Don't think!" The young man jerked so violently his homemade cigarette fell in chaff to his lap . "Now look what you made me do!"

"I'm sorry. It was such a nice friendly day."

"I'm no friend!"

"We're all friends now, or why live?"

"Friends!" the young man snorted, aimlessly plucking at the shredded grass and paper.

"Maybe there were friends back in 1970, but now... "

"1970. You must have been a baby then . They still had Butterfingers then in bright-yellow wrappers . Baby Ruths . Clark Bars in orange paper. Milky Ways---swallow a universe of stars, comets, meteors. Nice."

"It was never nice." The young man stood suddenly. "What's wrong with you?"

"I remember limes, and lemons, that's what's wrong with me. Do you remember oranges?"

"Damn right. Oranges, hell. You calling me a liar? You want me to feel bad? You nuts? Don't you know the law? You know I could turn you in, you?"

"I know, I know," said the old man, shrugging . "The weather fooled me. It made me want to compare--"

"Compare rumors, that's what they'd say, the police, the special cops, they'd say it, rumors, you trouble making bastard, you."

He seized the old man's lapels, which ripped so he had to grab another handful, yelling down into his face . "Why don't I just blast the living Jesus out of you? I ain't hurt no-one in so long, I..."

He shoved the old man. Which gave him the idea to pummel, and when he pummeled he began to punch, and punching made it easy to strike, and soon he rained blows upon the old man, who stood like one caught in thunder and down-poured storm, using only his fingers to ward off blows that fleshed his cheeks, shoulders, his brow, his chin, as the young man shrieked cigarettes, moaned candies, yelled smokes, cried sweets until the old man fell to be kick-rolled and shivering.

The young man stopped and began to cry. At the sound, the old man, cuddled, clenched into his pain, took his fingers away from his broken mouth and opened his eyes to gaze with astonishment at his assailant.

The young man wept. "Please..." begged the old man.

The young man wept louder, tears falling from his eyes.

"Don't cry," said the old man. "We won't be hungry forever. We'll rebuild the cities. Listen, I didn't mean for you to cry, only to think, where are we going, what are we doing, what've we done? You weren't hitting me. You meant to hit something else, but I was handy. Look, I'm sitting up. I'm okay."

The young man stopped crying and blinked down at the old man, who forced a bloody smile. "You... you can't go around," said the young man, "making people unhappy. I'll find someone to fix you!"

"Wait!" The old man struggled to his knees. "No!"

But the young man ran wildly off out of the park, yelling. Crouched alone, the old man felt his bones, found one of his teeth lying red amongst the strewn gravel, handled it sadly. "Fool," said a voice.

The old man glanced over and up. A lean man of some forty years stood leaning against a tree nearby, a look of pale weariness and curiosity on his long face. "Fool," he said again.

The old man gasped. "You were there, all the time, and did nothing?"

"What, fight one fool to save another? No." The stranger helped him up and brushed him off. "I do my fighting where it pays. Come on. You're going home with me."

The old man gasped again. "Why?"

"That boy'll be back with the police any second. I don't want you stolen away, you're a very precious commodity. I've heard of you, looked for you for days now. Good grief, and when I find you you're up to your famous tricks. What did you say to the boy made him mad?"

"I said about oranges and lemons, candy, cigarettes. I was just getting ready to recollect in detail wind-up toys, briar pipes and back scratchers, when he dropped the sky on me."

"I almost don't blame him. Half of me wants to hit you itself. Come on, double time. There's a siren, quickly." And they went swiftly, another way, out of the park.

He drank the homemade wine because it was easiest. The food must wait until his hunger overcame the pain in his broken mouth. He sipped, nodding. "Good, many thanks, good."

The stranger who had walked him swiftly out of the park sat across from him at the flimsy dining-room table as the stranger's wife placed broken and mended plates on the worn cloth.

"The beating," said the husband at last. "How did it happen?"

At this the wife almost dropped a plate.

"Relax," said the husband. "No one followed us. Go ahead, old man, tell us, why do you behave like a saint panting after martyrdom? You're famous, you know. Everyone's heard about you. Many would like to meet you. Myself, first, I want to know what makes you tick. Well?"

But the old man was only entranced with the vegetables on the chipped plate before him.

Twenty-six, no, twenty-eight peas! He counted the impossible sum! He bent to the incredible vegetables like a man praying over his quietest beads.

Twenty-eight glorious green peas, plus a few graphs of half-raw spaghetti announcing that today business was fair. But under the line of pasta, the cracked line of the plate showed where business for years now was more than terrible.

The old man hovered counting above the food like a great and inexplicable buzzard crazily fallen and roosting in this cold apartment, watched by his Samaritan hosts until at last he told, "These twenty-eight peas remind me of a movie I saw as a child. A comedian-do you know the word?-a funny man met a lunatic in a midnight house in this film and... "

The husband and wife laughed quietly. "No, that's not the joke yet, sorry," the old man apologized. "The lunatic sat the comedian down to an empty table, no knives, no forks, no food. "Dinner is served!" he cried.

Afraid of murder, the comedian fell in with the make-believe. 'Great!' he cried, pretending to chew steak, vegetables, dessert. He bit Nothing. 'Finely' he swallowed air. 'Wonderful!" Erm... you may laugh now."

But the husband and wife, grown still, only looked at their sparsely strewn plates.

The old man shook his head and went on. "The comedian, thinking to impress the madman, exclaimed, "And these spiced brandy Peaches are superb!" "Peaches!" screamed the madman, drawing a gun. "I served no peaches! You must be insane!" And shot the comedian in the behind!"

The old man, in the silence which ensued, picked up the first pea and weighed its lovely bulk upon his bent tin fork. He was about to put it in his mouth when there was a sharp rap on the door. "Special police!" a voice cried.

Silent but trembling, the wife hid the extra plate. The husband rose calmly to lead the old man to a wall where a panel hissed open, and he stepped in and the panel hissed shut and he stood in darkness hidden away as beyond, unseen, the apartment door opened.

Voices murmured excitedly. The old man could imagine the special policeman in his midnight-blue uniform, with drawn gun, entering to see only the flimsy furniture, the bare walls, the echoing linoleum floor, the glassless, boarded-over windows, this thin and oily film of civilization left on an empty shore when the storm tide of war went away.

"I'm looking for an old man," said the tired voice of authority beyond the wall. Strange, thought the old man, even the law sounds tired now. "Patched clothes..." But, thought the old man, I thought everyone's clothes well patched! "Dirty. About eighty years old..." But isn't everyone dirty, everyone old? the old man cried out to himself.

"If you turn him in, there's a week's rations as reward," said the police voice. "Plus ten cans of vegetables, five cans of soup, bonus."

Real tin cans with bright printed labels, thought the old man.

The cans flashed like meteors rushing by in the dark over his eyelids.

What a fine reward! Not ten thousand dollars, not twenty thousand dollars, no no, but five incredible cans of real, not imitation soup, and ten, count them, ten brilliant circus-colored cans of exotic vegetables like string beans and sun-yellow corn! Think of it.

Think!

There was a long silence in which the old man almost thought he heard faint murmurs of stomachs turning uneasily, slumbering but dreaming of dinners much finer than the hairballs of old illusion gone nightmare and politics gone sour in the long twilight since A. D. Annihilation Day. "Soup. Vegetables," said the police voice, a final time.

"Fifteen solid-pack cans!" The door slammed. The boots stomped away through the ramshackle tenement, pounding coffin-lid doors to stir other Lazarus souls alive to cry aloud of bright tins and real soups.

The poundings faded . There was a last banging slam.

And at last the hidden panel whispered up. The husband and wife did not look at him as he stepped out. He knew why and wanted to touch their elbows. "Even I," he said gently, "even I was tempted to turn myself in, to claim the reward, to eat the soup."

Still they would not look at him. "Why?" he asked. "Why didn't you hand me over? Why?" The husband, as if suddenly remembering, nodded to his wife. She went to the door, hesitated, her husband nodded again impatiently, and she went out, noiseless as a puff of cobweb. They heard her rustling along the hall, scratching softly at doors, which opened to gasps and murmurs.

"What's she up to? What are you up to?" asked the old man.

"You'll find out. Sit. Finish your dinner," said the husband. "Tell me why you're such a fool you make us fools who seek you out and bring you here."

"Why am I such a fool?" The old man sat. The old man munched slowly, taking peas one at a time from the plate which had been returned to him. "Yes, I am a fool. How did I start my foolishness?"

Years ago I looked at the ruined world, the dictatorships, the desiccated states and nations and said, "What can I do? Me, a weak old man, what? Rebuild a devastation? Ha!" But as I lay half asleep one night an old phonograph record played in my head. Two sisters named Duncan sang out of my childhood a song called 'Remembering'."

"'Remembering is all I do, dear, so try and remember, too.' I sang the song, and it wasn't a song but a way of life. What did I have to offer a world that was forgetting? My memory! How could this help? By offering a standard of comparison.

By telling the young what once was, by considering our losses. I found the more I remembered, the more I could remember! Depending on

who I sat down with I remembered imitation flowers, dial telephones, refrigerators, kazoos (you ever play a kazoo?!), thimbles, bicycle clips, not bicycles, no, but bicycle clips, isn't that wild and strange? Antimacassars. Do you know them?"

"Never mind. Once a man asked me to remember just the dashboard dials on a Cadillac. I remembered. I told him in detail. He listened. He cried great tears down his face. Happy tears or sad? I can't say. I only remember. Not literature, no, I never had a head for plays or poems, they slip away, they die.

All I am, really, is a trash heap of the mediocre, the third-best-hand-me-down useless and chromed-over slush and junk of a race-track civilization that ran last over a precipice. So all I offer really is scintillant junk, the clamored-after chronometers and absurd machineries of a never-ending river of robots and robot-mad owners. Yet, one way or another, civilization must get back on the road.

Those who can offer fine butterfly poetry, let them remember, let them offer. Those who can weave and build butterfly nets, let them weave, let them build. My gift is smaller than both, and perhaps contemptible in the long hoist, climb, jump toward the old and amiably silly peak. But I must dream myself worthy. For the things, silly or not, that people remember are the things they will search for.

I will, then, ulcerate their half-dead desires with vinegar-gnat memory. Then perhaps they'll rattle-bang the Big Clock together again, which is the city, the state and then the world. Let one man want wine, another lounge chairs, a third a batwing glider to soar the March winds on, to build bigger electropterodactyls to soar winds even greater with even greater people.

Someone wants moron Christmas trees and some wise man goes to cut them. Pack this all together, wheel in want, want in wheel, and I'm just there to oil them, but oil them I do. Ho, once I would have raved, 'Only the best is best, only quality is true!'

But roses grow from blood manure. Mediocre must be, so most-excellent can bloom. So I shall be the best mediocre there is and fight all who say, 'Slide under, sink back, dust-wallow, let brambles scurry over your living grave'. I shall protest the roving apeman tribes, the sheep-people munching the far fields prayed on by the feudal land-baron wolves who rarefy themselves in the few skyscraper summits and horde unremembered foods. And these villains I will kill with can opener and corkscrew."

"I shall run them down with ghosts of Buick, Kissel-Kar and Moon, thrash them with licorice whips until they cry for some sort of unqualified mercy. Can I do all this? One can only try."

The old man rummaged the last pea, with the last words, in his mouth, while his Samaritan host simply looked at him with gently amazed eyes, and far off up through the house people moved, doors tapped open and shut, and there was a gathering outside the door of this apartment where now the husband said, "And you asked why we didn't turn you in? Do you hear that out there?"

"It sounds like everyone in the apartment house."

"Everyone. Old man, old fool, do you remember... motion picture houses, or, better, drive-in movies?" The old man smiled. "Do you?"

"Almost. Look, listen, today, now, if you're going to be a fool, if you want to run risks, do it in the aggregate, in one fell blow. Why waste your breath on one, or two, or even three, if..."

The husband opened the door and nodded outside. Silently, one at a time and in couples, the people of the house entered. Entered this room as if entering a synagogue or church or the kind of church known as a movie or the kind of movie known as a drive-in and the hour was growing late in the day, with the sun going down the sky, and soon in the early evening hours, in the dark, the room would be full and in the one light the voice of the old man would speak and these would listen and hold hands and it would be like the old days.

With the balconies and the dark, or the cars and the dark, and just the memory, the words, of popcorn, and the words for the gum and the sweet drinks and candy, but the words, anyway, the words...

And while the people were coming in and settling on the floor, and the old man watched them, incredulous that he had summoned them here without knowing, the husband said, "Is this better than taking a chance in the open?"

"Yes. Strange. I hate pain. I hate being hit and chased. But my tongue moves. I must hear what it has to say. Still this is better."

"Good." The husband pressed a red ticket into his palm. "When this is all over, an hour from now, here is a ticket from a friend of mine in Transportation. One train crosses the country each week. Each week I get a ticket for some idiot I want to help. This week it's you." The old man read the destination on the folded red paper: "Chicago Abyss", and added, "Is the Abyss still there?"

"This time next year Lake Michigan may break through the last crust and make a new lake in the pit where the city once was. There's life of sorts around the crater rim, and a branch train goes west once a month. Once you leave here, keep moving, forget you met or know us.

I'll give you a small list of people like ourselves. Look them up, out in the wilderness. But, for God's sake, in the open, alone for a year, declare a moratorium. Keep your wonderful mouth shut. And here--" The husband gave him a yellow card. "A dentist I know. Tell him to make you a new set of teeth that will only open at mealtime."

A few people, hearing, laughed, and the old man laughed quietly and the people were in now, dozens of them, and the day was late, and the husband and wife shut the door and stood by it and turned and waited for this last special time when the old man might open his mouth.

The old man stood up . His audience grew very still.

The train came, rusty and loud at midnight, into a suddenly snow-filled station. Under a cruel dusting of white, the ill-washed people crowded into and through the ancient chair cars, mashing the old man along the corridor and into an empty compartment that had once been a lavatory. Soon the floor was a solid mass of bed roll on which sixteen people twisted and turned in darkness, fighting their way into sleep.

The train rushed forth to white emptiness.

The old man, thinking, Quiet, shut up, no, don't speak, nothing, no, stay still, think, careful, cease! found himself now swayed, joggled, hurled this way and that as he half crouched against a wall.

He and just one other were upright in this monster room of dreadful sleep. A few feet away, similarly shoved against the wall, sat an eight-year-old boy with a drawn sick paleness escaping from his cheeks. Full awake, eyes bright, he seemed to watch, he did watch, the old man's mouth. The boy gazed because he must. The train hooted, roared, swayed, yelled and ran.

Half an hour passed in a thunderous grinding passage by night under the snow-hidden moon, and the old man's mouth was tight-nailed shut.

Another hour, and stiff boned shut. Another hour, and the muscles around his cheeks began to slacken. Another, and his lips parted to wet themselves. The boy stayed awake. The boy saw. The boy waited.

Immense sifts of silence came down the night air outside, tunneled by avalanche train. The travelers, very deep in invoiced terror, numbed by flight, slept each separate, but the boy did not take his eyes away and at last the old man leaned forward, softly. "Sh. Boy. Your name?"

"Joseph." The train swayed and groaned in its sleep, a monster floundering through timeless dark toward a mom that could not be imagined. "Joseph." The old man savored the word, bent forward, his eyes gentle and shining.

His face filled with pale beauty. His eyes widened until they seemed blind. He gazed at a distant and hidden thing. He cleared his throat ever so softly. "Ah ... "

The train roared round a curve. The people rocked in their snowing sleep. "Well, Joseph," whispered the old man. He lifted his fingers softly in the air. "Once upon a time... "

The end