

Well, What Do You Have to Say for Yourself? Ray Bradbury

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“Well, what do you have to say for yourself?”

He looked at the telephone he had just picked up, and put it back near his ear.

“What time is it?” he asked.

“Aren’t you wearing your watch?”

“It’s by my bed.”

“It’s six thirty-five.”

“My God, so early, and the first thing you say is, ‘What do you have to say for yourself?’ I’m not awake yet.”

“Go make some coffee and talk. What’s the hotel like?”

“At six thirty-five in the morning, what’s the hotel like? I don’t like hotels. Three bad nights now with no sleep.”

“How do you think I’ve been sleeping?”

“Look,” he said, “I just got out of bed, let me put on my glasses and look at my watch, can I come over?”

“What for, what’s the use?”

“You asked what I had to say, I want to say it.”

“Then say it.”

“Not on the phone. It’ll take some time. Give me half an hour. Fifteen minutes. All right, then, ten.”

“Five,” she said, “and talk fast.”

She hung up.

At ten minutes after eight he watched her pour coffee and let him pick up his own cup. She crossed her arms over her breasts and waited, looking at the ceiling.

"It's already five minutes and all we've done is pour the coffee," he said.

She looked at her watch, silently.

"Okay, okay," he said, and burnt his lips taking the coffee, putting it down, rubbing his mouth, shutting his eyes, clenching his hands together in a kind of tight prayer mode.

"Well?" she said.

"Don't say it again," he said, eyes shut. "Here goes. All men. All men are alike."

"You can say that again," she said.

He waited, eyes shut, to be sure she was done speaking.

"At least we agree on one thing," he said. "All men are alike. I'm like every other man that ever lived.

They are all like me. That has never changed, that will never change. That is a given. That is a rock bottom basic genetic truth."

"How did genetics get into this?"

He had to force himself to remain silent, and then he said, "When God touched Adam, the genetics were put there. Can I continue?"

Her silence was a kind of grim affirmative.

"Let's agree for the moment, we can argue it later, that all the billions of men that ever grew up racing and yelling and behaving like lunatics were one and the same, some smaller, some taller, none different. I'm one of those."

He waited again, but since there was no comment he clenched his eyes, worked his fingers, interlaced, and went on.

“Along with all those circus animals, the other humans came, the ones nearer that name human, who had to put up with the carnival atmosphere, clean the cages, pick up the cave or the parlor, raise the kids, go mad, recover, go mad again, make do.”

“It’s getting late.”

“It’s only eight-fifteen in the morning. Give me until eight-thirty, for God’s sake. Please.”

She was silent again, so he went on.

“So you have a few hundred thousand years of getting out of caves and hunting for food and settling down. That’s all pretty recent. I’m writing an essay now called ‘Too Soon from the Cave, Too Far Away from the Stars.’” Silence.

“But that’s neither here nor there, sorry. But after tens of thousands of years of kindergarten turmoil, the women, gone bald from being trekked across country by their long hair, bruised and beaten, finally said, ‘Enough! Stand still, sit straight, pull up your socks, now hear this!’

“The men, for that’s what they finally became, not cave dwellers, not absolutely dumb yahoos, sat straight, pulled up their dirty socks, and listened. And do you know what they heard?”

A silence that suggested her arms were still crossed firmly over her breasts.

“What they heard was amazing. It was the marriage ceremony. Yes, that was it. Primitive at first, but it got larger and clearer and better. And the men, struck dumb, actually listened. At first out of curiosity, and then, though they wouldn’t admit it, impressed.

It had a kind of ring to it. It got through to those uncaged beasts and some of them nodded and then, after a while, all of them nodded intently and indicated, hell, why not give it a try.

“There had to be some way to calm us down, make us behave, for a little while, sometimes for good,” he said.

“And we all stood there, a few to start, more to follow by the dozens and thousands and finally millions, young men full of pomegranate seeds by the billion, answering questions, nodding, saying yes, but in their hearts wondering how in hell they were going to live up to all this, these fine words, their grand sentiments, and their brides beside them crying and the brides’ fathers behind them like the Great Wall of China, doubtful but in hopes.

“And I remember standing there by you and thinking this is ridiculous, it won’t work, it can’t last, I love her, sure, I really love her, but somewhere up the line, who can say how or where or why, I’ll fall off the wagon, like everyone else, and make a damn fool, clumsy ass, of myself, and hope she won’t know or if she does, ignore, or if not ignore, somewhere in between.

And a mess of worms inside me, I gave all the right answers but kept my own questions, next thing I knew we stepped out in a summer rain of rice.

“Well,” he said, and looked at his hands that had been interlaced, but now the fingers hung free and his hands were there, palms up, as if to receive something, they knew not what.

“That’s it, except to say in the next five hundred years or a thousand or a million, no matter where we go, I guess it’s back to the Moon and then out to make camps on Mars and maybe someday some planet near Alpha Centauri, but no matter how far we go or how great our aims and announcements, we will never change.

Men will go on being men, stupid, arrogant, strong-willed, stubborn, reckless, destructive, murderous, but sometimes librarians and poets, kite fliers and boys who see things in clouds, nephew to Robert Frost and Shakespeare, but still not always dependable, soft-hearted under the skin maybe, capable of tears if the children should die and life be

over, always looking at the next field where the grass is greener and the milk is free, fixed on a Moon crater or stationed on one of Saturn's moons, but the same beast that yelled out of the cave half a million years ago, not much different, and the other half of the human race there staring at him and asking him to listen to the wedding rites with half a heart and half an ear, and sometimes, sometimes he listens."

He paused, fearful of her silence, but went on: "I often wonder, don't you, at all the houses I pass on the way to work, down the hill in the morning, and I think, whoever's there, I hope they're happy, I hope it isn't an empty house or a silent house, and coming home at night, passing the same houses I think, are they still happy, are they silent, is there any kind of stir or yell?"

And then I see a basketball hoop in front of one house and I think there's a son there, there's a change, maybe. And another house, there's rice thrown in the drive, and there's a daughter, happy maybe, no way to know. But every morning I think the very same thing. I hope they're happy, oh God, please, I hope it's so."

He stopped, breathless, and waited, eyes shut.

"And that's the way you see yourself?" she said.

"Approximately," he said.

"And all those other men everywhere."

"In all time, yes, by the million."

"You claim protection from them?"

"No, we're out in the open where you can get at us."

"No protective coloration?"

"None of that."

"All the same?"

"None different."

"You're not giving us women much choice."

"There's very little. You take us as you find us. Or you don't take us at all. With you, it's different. We look at you and see girlfriends, lovers,

wives, mothers, teachers, nurses. You have so many sides. We have one if we're lucky, the work that we do, not much else."

He waited.

"Are you done?" she said.

"I think so. Yes. I think that's it."

Silence, and then, "Is this some sort of excuse?"

"No."

"Are you rationalizing?"

"I don't think so."

"An alibi then, for all of you?"

"No alibi, no."

"Are you asking to be understood?"

"I'm not quite sure. Something like that."

"Are you asking for sympathy?"

"Never."

"Compassion?"

"Oh, God no."

"Empathy?"

"All those words are too strong."

"What then, what?"

"I just wanted you to listen is all."

"I've done that."

"And thanks."

He opened his eyes and saw that where she sat her eyes were closed now, but her arms, her blessed arms, had fallen free and down off her breasts.

Silently, he arose and moved toward the door and opened it and went out.

He had just closed the front door to his hotel apartment when the phone rang. He stood over it, weaving, until it had rung four or five times. Then, carefully, he picked it up.

"You're a rat," she said, a long way off.

"I know," he said.

"You're a bastard," she said.

"That, too," he said.

"And a no-good bounder and a cad."

"All those."

"And a son of a bitch."

"That almost goes without saying."

"But," she said.

He waited. He heard her take in a long breath.

"But," she said, and there was a long pause, "I love you."

"Thank God," he whispered.

"Come home," she said.

"I will," he said.

"And don't start blubbering," she said. "I can't stand men who cry."

"I won't," he said.

"And when you come in," she said.

"Yes?"

"Don't forget to lock the door."

"It's as good as locked," he said.

The end