

The Better Part of Wisdom

Ray Bradbury

The room was like a great warm hearth, lit by an unseen fire, gone comfortable. The fireplace itself struggled to keep a small blaze going on a few wet logs and some turf, which was no more than smoke and several lazy orange eyes of charcoal. The place was slowly filling, draining, and refilling with music. A single lemon lamp was lit in a far corner, illumining walls painted a summer color of yellow. The hardwood floor was polished so severely it glowed like a dark river upon which floated throw-rugs whose plumage resembled South American wild birds, flashing electric blues, whites, and jungle greens. White porcelain vases, brimming with fresh-cut hothouse flowers, kept their serene fires burning on four small tables about the room. Above the fireplace, a serious portrait of a young man gazed out with eyes the same color as the ceramics, a deep blue, raw with intelligence and vitality.

Entering the room quietly, one might not have noticed the two men, they were so still.

One sat reclining back upon the pure white couch, eyes closed. The second lay upon the couch so his head was pillowed in the lap of the other. His eyes were shut, too, listening. Rain touched the windows. The music ended.

Instantly there was a soft scratching at the door.

Both men blinked as if to say: people don't scratch, they knock.

The man who had been lying down leaped to the door and called: "Someone there?"

"By God, there is," said an old voice with a faint brogue.

"Grandfather!"

With the door flung wide, the young man pulled a small round old man into the warm-lit room.

"Tom, boy, ah Tom, and glad I am to see you!"

They fell together in bear-hugs, pawing. Then the old man felt the other person in the room and moved back.

Tom spun around, pointing. "Grandpa, this is Frank. Frank, this is Grandpa, I mean --oh, hell --"

The old man saved the moment by trotting forward to seize and pull Frank to his feet, where he towered high above this small intruder from the night.

"Frank, is it?" the old man yelled up the heights.

"Yes, sir," Frank called back down.

"I --" said the grandfather, "have been standing outside that door for five minutes --"

"Five minutes?" cried both young men, alarmed.

"--debating whether to knock. I heard the music, you see, and finally I said, damn, if there's a girl with him he can either shove her out the window in the rain or show the lovely likes of her to the old man. Hell, I said, and knocked, and" --he slung down his battered old valise --"there is no young girl here, I see --or, by God, you've smothered her in the closet, eh!"

"There is no young girl, Grandfather." Tom turned in a circle, his hands out to show.

"But --" The grandfather eyed the polished floor, the white throw-rugs, the bright flowers, the watchful portraits on the walls. "You've borrowed her place, then?"

"Borrowed?"

"I mean, by the look of the room, there's a woman's touch. It looks like them steamship posters I seen in the travel windows half my life."

"Well," said Frank. "We--"

"The fact is, Grandfather," said Tom, clearing his throat, "we did this place over. Redecorated."

"Redecorated?" The old man's jaw dropped. His eyes toured the four walls, stunned. "The two of you are responsible? Jesus!"

The old man touched a blue and white ceramic ashtray, and bent to stroke a bright cockatoo throw-rug.

"Which of you did what?" he asked, suddenly, squinting one eye at them.

Tom flushed and stammered, "Well, we --"

"Ah, God, no, no, stop!" cried the old man, lifting one hand. "Here I am, fresh in the place, and sniffing about like a crazy hound and no fox. Shut that damn door. Ask me where I'm going, what am I up to, eh, eh? And, while you're at it, do you have a touch of the Beast in this art gallery?"

"The Beast it is!" Tom slammed the door, hustled his grandfaout of his greatcoat, and brought forth three tumblers and a bottle of Irish whiskey, which the old man touched as if it were a newborn babe. "Well, that's more like it. What do we drink to?"

"Why, you, Grandpa!"

"No, no." The old man gazed at Tom and then at his friend, Frank. "Christ," he sighed, "you're so damn young it breaks my bones in the ache. Come now, let's drink to fresh hearts

and apple cheeks and all life up ahead and happiness somewhere for the taking. Yes?"

"Yes!" said both, and drank.

And drinking watched each other merrily or warily, half one, half the other. And the young saw in the old bright pink face, lined as it was, cuffed as it was by circumstantial life, the echo of Tom's face itself peering out through the years. In the old blue eyes, especially, was the sharp bright intelligence that sprang from the old portrait on the wall, that would be young until coins weighted them shut. And around the edges of the old mouth was the smile that blinked and went in Tom's face, and in the old hands was the quick, surprising action of Tom's, as if both old man and young had hands that lived to themselves and did sly things by impulse.

So they drank and leaned and smiled and drank again, each a mirror for the other, each delighting in the fact that an ancient man and a raw youth with the same eyes and hands and blood were met on this raining night, and the whiskey was good.

"Ah, Tom, Tom, it's a loving sight you are!" said the grandfa "Dublin's been sore without you these four years. But, hell, I'm dying. No, don't ask me how or why. The doctor has the news, damn him, and shot me between the eyes with it. So I said instead of relatives shelling out their cash to come say good-bye to the old horse, why not make the farewell tour yourself and shake hands and drink drinks.

So here I am this night and tomorrow be London to see Lucie and then Glasgow to see Dick. I'll stay no more than a day each place, so as not to overload anyone. Now shut that mouth, which is hanging open. I am not out collecting sympathies. I am eighty, and it's time for a damn fine wake, which I have saved money for, so not a word. I have come to see everyone and make sure they are in a fit state of half-graceful joy so I can kick up my heels and fall dead with a good heart, if that's possible. I --"

"Grandfather!" cried Tom, suddenly, and seized the old man's hands and then his shoulders.

"Why, bless you, boy, thanks," said the old man, seeing the tears in the young man's eyes. "But just what I find in your gaze is enough." He set the boy gently back. "Tell me about London, your work, this place. You too, Frank, a friend of Tom's is as good as my son's son! Tell everything, Tom!"

"Excuse me." Frank darted toward the door. "You both have much to talk about. There's shopping I must do --"

"Wait!"

Frank stopped.

For the old man had really seen the portrait over the fireplace now and walked to it to put out his hand, to squint and read the signed name at the bottom.

"Frank Davis. Is that you, boy? You did this picture?"

"Yes, sir," said Frank, at the door.

"How long ago?"

"Three years ago, I think. Yes, three."

The old man nodded slowly, as if this information added to the great puzzle, a continuing bafflement.

"Tom, do you know who that looks like?"

"Yes, Grand-da. You. A long time ago."

"So you see it, too, eh? Christ in heaven, yes. That's me on my eighteenth birthday and all Ireland and its grasses and tender maids good for the chewing ahead and not behind me. That's me, that's me. Jesus I was handsome, and Jesus, Tom, so are you. And Jesus, Frank, you are uncanny. You are a fine artist, boy."

"You do what you can do." Frank had come back to the middle of the room, quietly.

"You do what you know."

"And you know Tom, to the hair and eyelash." The old man turned and smiled. "How does it feel, Tom, to look out of that borrowed face? Do you feel great, is the world your Dublin prawn and oyster?"

Tom laughed. Grandfather laughed. Frank joined them.

"One more drink." The old man poured. "And we'll let you slip diplomatically out, Frank. But come back. I must talk with you."

"What about?" said Frank.

"Ah, the Mysteries. Of Life, of Time, of Existence. What else did you have in mind, Frank?"

"Those will do, Grandfather --" said Frank, and stopped, amazed at the word come out of his mouth. "I mean, Mr. Kelly--"

"Grandfather will do."

"I must run." Frank doused his drink. "Phone you later, Tom."

The door shut. Frank was gone.

"You'll sleep here tonight of course, Grandpa?" Tom seized the one valise. "Frank won't be back. You'll have his bed." Tom was busy arranging the sheets on one of the two couches against the far wall. "Now, it's early. Let's drink some more, Grandfather, and talk."

But the old man, stunned, was silent, eyeing each picture in turn upon the wall. "Grand painting, that."

"Frank did them."

"That's a fine lamp there."

"Frank made it."

"The rug on the floor here now --?"

"Frank."

"Jesus," whispered the old man, "he's a maniac for work, is he not?"

Quietly, he shuffled about the room like one visiting a gallery.

"It seems," he said, "the place is absolutely blowing apart with fine artistic talent. You turned your hand to nothing like this, in Dublin."

"You learn a lot, away from home," said Tom, uneasily.

The old man shut his eyes and drank his drink.

"Is anything wrong, Grandfather?"

"It will hit me in the middle of the night," said the old man. "I will probably stand up in bed with a hell of a yell. But right now it is just a thing in the pit of my stomach and the back of my head. Let's talk, boy, let's talk."

And they talked and drank until midnight and then the old man got put to bed and Tom went to bed himself and after a long while both slept.

About two in the morning, the old man woke suddenly.

He peered around in the dark, wondering where he was, then saw the paintings, the upholstered chairs, and the lamp and rugs Frank had made, and sat up. He clenched his fists. Then, rising, he threw on his clothes, and staggered toward the door as if fearful that he might not make it before something terrible happened.

When the door slammed, Tom jerked his eyes wide.

Somewhere off in the dark there was a sound of someone calling, shouting, defying the elements, someone at the top of his lungs crying blasphemies, saying God and Jesus and Jesus and God, and finally blows struck, wild blows, as if someone were hitting a wall or a person.

After a long while, his grandfather shuffled back into the room, soaked to the skin.

Weaving, muttering, whispering, the old man peeled off his wet clothes before the tireless fire, then threw a newspaper on the coals, which blazed up briefly to show a face relaxing out of fury into numbness. The old man found and put on Tom's discarded robe. Tom kept his eyes tight as the

old man held his hands out toward the dwindling blaze, streaked with blood.

"Damn, damn, damn. There!" He poured whiskey and gulped it down. He blinked at Tom and the paintings on the wall and looked at Tom and the flowers in the vases and then drank again. After a long while, Tom pretended to wake up.

"It's after two. You need your rest, Grand-da."

"I'll rest when I'm done drinking. And thinking!"

"Thinking what, Grandpa?"

"Right now," said the old man, seated in the dim room with the tumbler in his two hands, and the fire gone to ghost on the hearth, "remembering your dear grandmother in June of the year 1902. And there is the thought of your father born, which is fine, and you born after him, which is fine. And there is the thought of your father dying when you were young and the hard life of your mother and her holding you too close, maybe, in the cold beggar life of flinty Dublin. And me out in the meadows with my working life, and us together only once a month. The being born of people and the going away of people. These turn round in an old man's night. I think of you born, Tom, a happy day. Then I see you here now. That's it."

The old man grew silent and drank his drink.

"Grand-da," said Tom, at last, almost like a child crept in for penalties and forgiveness of a sin as yet unnamed, "do I worry you?"

"No." Then the old man added, "But what life will do with you, how you may be treated, good or ill --I sit up late with that."

The old man sat. The young man lay wide-eyed watching him and later said, as if reading thoughts:

"Grandfather, I am happy."

The old man leaned forward.

"Are you, boy?"

"I have never been so happy in my life, sir."

"Yes?" The old man looked through the dim air of the room, at the young face. "I see that. But will you stay happy, Tom?"

"Does anyone ever stay happy, Grandfather? Nothing lasts, does it?"

"Shut up! Your grandma and me, that lasted!"

"No. It wasn't all the same, was it? The first years were one thing, the last years another."

The old man put his hand over his own mouth and then massaged his face, closing his eyes.

"God, yes, you're right. There are two, no, three, no, four lives, for each of us. Not one of them lasts, it's sure. But the thought of them does. And out of the four or five or a dozen lives you live, one is special. I remember, once. . ."

The old man's voice faltered.

The young man said, "Once, Grandpa?"

The old man's eyes fixed somewhere to a horizon of the Past. He did not speak to the room or to Tom or to anyone. He didn't even seem to be speaking to himself.

"Oh, it was a long time ago. When I first came in this room tonight, for no reason, strange, the memory was there. I ran back down along the shoreline of Galway to that week. . ."

"What week, when?"

"My twelfth birthday fell that week in summer, think of it! Victoria still queen and me in a turf-hut out by Galway strolling the shore for food to be picked up from the tides, and the weather so sweet you almost turned sad with the taste of it, for you knew it would soon go away.

"And in the middle of the great fair weather along the road by the shore one noon came this tinker's caravan carrying their dark gypsy people to set up camp by the sea.

"There was a mother, a father, and a girl in that caravan, and this boy who came running down by the sea alone, perhaps in need of company, for there I was with nothing to do, and in need of strangers myself.

"Here he came running. And I shall not forget my first sight of him from that day till they drop me in the earth. He --

"Ah God, I'm a failure with words! Stop everything. I must go further back.

"A circus came to Dublin. I visited the sideshows of pinheads and dwarfs and terrible small midgets and fat women and skeleton men. Seeing a crowd about one last exhibit, I thought this must be the most horrible of all. I edged over to look at this final terror! And what did I see? The crowd was drawn to nothing more nor less than: a little girl of some six years, so fair, so beautiful, so cream-white of cheek, so blue of eye, so golden of hair, so quiet in her manner that in the midst of this fleshy holocaust she called attention. By saying nothing her shout of beauty stopped the show. All had to come to her to get well again. For it was a sick menagerie and she the only sweet lovely Doc about to give us back life.

"Well, that girl in the sideshow was as wonderful a surprise as this boy come running down the beach like a young horse.

"He was not dark like his parents.

"His hair was all gold curls and bits of sun. He was cut out of bronze by the light, and what wasn't bronze was copper. Impossible, but it seemed that this boy of twelve, like myself, had been bom on that very day, he looked that new and fresh. And in his face were these bright brown eyes, the eyes of an animal that has run a long way, pursued, along the shorelines of the world.

"He pulled up and the first thing he said to me was laughter. He was glad to be alive, and announced that by the sound he made. I must have laughed in turn, for his spirit was catching. He shoved out his brown hand. I hesitated. He gestured impatiently and grabbed my hand.

"My God, after all these years I remember what we said: 'Isn't it funny?' he said.

"I didn't ask what was funny. I knew. He said his name was Jo. I said my name was Tim. And there we were, two boys on the beach and the universe a good rare joke between us.

"He looked at me with his great round full copper eyes, and laughed out his breath and I thought: He has chewed hay! his breath smells of grass; and suddenly I was giddy. The smell stunned me. Jesus God, I thought, reeling, I'm drunk, and why? I've nipped Dad's booze, but God, what's this? Drunk by noon, hit by the sun, giddy from what? the sweet mash caught in a strange boy's teeth? No, no!

"Then Jo looked straight at me and said, 'There isn't much time.'

" 'Much time?' I asked.

" 'Why,' said Jo, 'for us to be friends. We are, aren't we?'

"He breathed the smell of mown fields upon me.

"Jesus God, I wanted to cry, Yes! And almost fell down, but staggered back as if he had hit me a friend's hit. And my mouth opened and shut and I said, 'Why is there so little time?'

“‘Because,’ said Jo, 'we'll only be here six days, seven at the most, then on down and around Eire. I'll never see you again in my life. So we'll just have to pack a lot of things in a few days, won't we, Tim?'

"Six days? That's no time at all!' I protested, and wondered why I found myself suddenly destroyed, left destitute on the shore. A thing had not begun, but already I sorrowed after its death.

" 'A day here, a week there, a month somewhere else,' said Jo. 'I must live very quickly, Tim. I have no friends that last. Only what I remember. So, wherever I go, I say to my new friends, quick, do this, do that, let us make many happenings, a long list, so you will remember me when I am gone, and I you, and say: that was a friend. So, let's begin. There!'

And Jo tagged me and ran.

"I ran after him, laughing, for wasn't it silly, me headlong after a stranger boy unknown five minutes before? We must've run a mile down that long summer beach before he let me catch him. I thought I might pummel him for making me run so far for nothing, for something, for God knew what! But when we tumbled to earth and I pinned him down, all he did was spring his breath in one gasp up at me, one breath, and I leaped back and shook my head and sat staring at him, as if I'd plunged wet hands in an open electric socket. He laughed to see me fall away, to see me scurry and sit in wonder. 'O, Tim,' he said, 'we shall be friends.'

"You know the dread long cold weather, most months, of Ireland? Well, this week of my twelfth birthday, it was summer each day and every day for the seven days named by Jo as the limit which would be no more days. We walked the shore, and that's all there was, the simple thing of us upon the shore, and building castles or climbing hills to fight wars among the mounds. We found an old round tower and yelled up and down from it. But mostly it was walking, our arms about each other like twins bom in a tangle, never cut free by knife or lightning. I inhaled, he exhaled. Then he breathed and I was the sweet chorus. We talked, far through the nights on the sand, until our parents came seeking the lost who had found they knew not what. Lured home, I slept beside him, or him me, and talked and laughed, Jesus, laughed, till dawn. Then out again we roared until the earth swung up to hit our backs. We found ourselves laid out with sweet hilarity, eyes tight, gripped to each other's shaking, and the laugh jumped free like one

silver trout following another. God, I bathed in his laughter as he bathed in mine, until we were weak as if love had put us to the slaughter and exhaustions. We panted then like pups in hot summer, empty of laughing, and sleepy with friendship. And the weather for that week was blue and gold, no clouds, no rain, and a wind that smelled of apples, but no, only that boy's wild breath.

"It crossed my mind, long after, if ever an old man could bathe again in that summer fount, the wild spout of breathing that sprang from his nostrils and gasped from his mouth, why one might peel off a score of years, one would be young, how might the flesh resist?

"But the laughter is gone and the boy gone into a man lost somewhere in the world, and here I am two lifetimes later, speaking of it for the first time. For who was there to tell? From my twelfth birthday week, and the gift of friendship, to this, who might I tell of that shore and that summer and the two of us walking all tangled in our arms and lives and life as perfect as the letter O, a damned great circle of rare weather, lovely talk, and us certain we'd live forever, never die, and be good friends.

"And at the end of the week, he left.

"He was wise for his years. He didn't say good-bye. All of a sudden, the tinker's cart was gone.

"I shouted along the shore. A long way off, I saw the caravan go over a hill. But then his wisdom spoke to me.

Don't catch. Let go. Weep now, my own wisdom said. And I wept.

"I wept for three days and on the fourth grew very still. I did not go down to the shore again for many months. And in all the years that have passed, never have I known such a thing again. I have had a good life, a fine wife, good children, and you, boy, Tom, you. But as sure as I sit here, never after that was I so agonized, mad, and crazy wild. Never did drink make me as drunk. Never did I cry so hard again. Why, Tom? Why do I say this, and what was it? Back so far in innocence, back in the time when I had nobody, and knew nothing. How is it I remember him when all else slips away? When often I cannot remember your dear grandmother's face, God forgive me, why does his face come back on the shore by the sea? Why do I see us fall again and the earth reach up to take the wild young horses driven mad by too much sweet grass in a line of days that never end?"

The old man grew silent. After a moment, he added, "The better part of wisdom, they say, is what's left unsaid. I'll say no more. I don't even know why I've said all this."

Tom lay in the dark. "I know."

"Do you, lad?" asked the old man. "Well, tell me. Someday."

"Someday," said Tom. "I will."

They listened to the rain touch at the windows.

"Are you happy, Tom?"

"You asked that before, sir."

"I ask again. Are you happy?"

"Yes."

Silence.

"Is it summertime on the shore, Tom? Is it the magic seven days? Are you drunk?"

Tom did not answer for a long while, and then said nothing but, "Grand-da," and then moved his head once in a nod.

The old man lay back in the chair. He might have said, this will pass. He might have said, it will not last. He might have said many things. Instead he said, "Tom?"

"Sir?"

"Ah, Jesus!" shouted the old man suddenly. "Christ, God Almighty! Damn it to hell!" Then the old man stopped and his breathing grew quiet. "There. It's a maniac night. I had to let out one last yell. I just had to, boy."

And at last they slept, with the rain falling fast.

With the first light of dawn, the old man dressed with careful quietness, picked up his valise, and bent to touch the sleeping young man's cheek with the palm of one hand.

"Tom, good-bye," he whispered.

Moving down the dim stairwell toward the steadily beating rain, he found Tom's friend waiting at the foot of the stairs.

"Frank! You haven't been down here all night?"

"No, no, Mr. Kelly," said Frank, quickly. "I stayed at a friend's."

The old man turned to look up the dark stairwell as if he could see the room and Tom in it warm asleep.

"Gah . . . !" Something almost a growl stirred in his throat and subsided. He shifted uneasily and looked back down at the dawn kindled on this young man's face, this one who had painted a picture that hung above the fireplace in the room above.

"The damn night is over," said the old man. "So if you'll just stand aside --"

"Sir."

The old man took one step down and burst out:

"Listen! If you hurt Tom, in any way ever, why, Jesus, I'll break you cross my knee! You hear?"

Frank held out his hand. "Don't worry."

The old man looked at the hand as if he had never seen one before. He sighed.

"Ah, damn it to hell, Frank, Tom's friend, so young you're destruction to the eyes. Get away!"

They shook hands.

"Jesus, that's a hard grip," said the old man, surprised.

Then he was gone, as if the rain had hustled him off in its own multitudinous running.

The young man shut the upstairs door and stood for a moment looking at the figure on the bed and at last went over and as if by instinct put his hand down to the exact same spot where the old man had printed his hand in farewell not five minutes before. He touched the summer cheek.

In his sleep, Tom smiled the smile of his father's father, and called the old man, deep in a dream, by name.

He called him twice.

And then he slept quietly.

