



HarperCollins e-books



Quicker Than the Eye

Ray Bradbury

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wm
WILLIAM MORROW

Dedication

To Donn Albright, my Golden Retriever, with love

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Praise for RAY BRADBURY'S: QUICKER THAN THE EYE

Books by Ray Bradbury

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About the Publisher

Unterseeboot Doktor

The incredible event occurred during my third visit to Gustav Von Seyfertitz, my foreign psychoanalyst.

I should have guessed at the strange explosion before it came.

After all, my alienist, *truly* alien, had the coincidental name, Von Seyfertitz, of the tall, lean, aquiline, menacing, and therefore beautiful actor who played the high priest in the 1935 film *She*.

In *She*, the wondrous villain waved his skeleton fingers, hurled insults, summoned sulfured flames, destroyed slaves, and knocked the world into earthquakes.

After that, "At Liberty," he could be seen riding the Hollywood Boulevard trolley cars as calm as a mummy, as quiet as an unwired telephone pole.

Where was I? Ah. yes!

It was my *third* visit to my psychiatrist. He had called that day and cried, "Douglas, you stupid goddamn son of a bitch, it's time for beddy-bye!"

Beddy-bye was, of course, his couch of pain and humiliation where I lay writhing in agonies, assumed Jewish guilt and Northern Baptist stress as he from time to time muttered, "A fruitcake remark!" or "Dumb!" or "If you ever do *that* again, I'll kill you!"

As you can see, Gustav Von Seyfertitz was a most unusual *mine* specialist. Mine? Yes. Our problems are land mines in our heads. *Step* on them! Shock-troop therapy, he once called it, searching for words. "Blitzkrieg?" I offered.

"*Ja!*" He grinned his shark grin. "That's *it!*"

Again, this was my third visit to his strange, metallic-looking room with a most odd series of locked doors on a roundish door. Suddenly, as I was maundering and treading dark waters, I heard his spine stiffen behind me. He gasped a great death rattle, sucked air, and blew it out in a yell that curled and bleached my hair:

"Dive! Dive!"

I dove.

Thinking that the room might be struck by a titanic iceberg, I fell, to scuttle beneath the lion-claw footed couch.

"Dive!" cried the old man.

"Dive?" I whispered, and looked up.

To see a submarine periscope, all polished brass, slide up to vanish in the ceiling.

Gustav Von Seyfertitz stood pretending not to notice me, the sweat-oiled leather couch, or the vanished brass machine. Very calmly, in the fashion of Conrad Veidt in *Casablanca*, or Erich von Stroheim, the manservant in *Sunset Boulevard* ... he ...

... lit a cigarette and let two calligraphic dragon plumes of smoke write themselves (his initials) on the air.

"You were saying?" he said.

"No." I stayed on the floor. "You were saying. Dive?"

"I did not say that," he purred.

"Beg pardon, you said, very clearly—Dive!"

"Not possible." He exhaled two more scrolled dragon plumes. "You hallucinate. Why do you stare?"

at the ceiling?"

"Because," I said, "~~unless I am further hallucinating, buried in that valve lock up there is a nine foot length of German Leica brass periscope!~~"

"This boy is incredible, listen to him," muttered Von Seyfertitz to his alter ego, which was always third person in the room when he analyzed. When he was not busy exhaling his disgust with me, I tossed asides at himself. "How many martinis did you have at lunch?"

"Don't hand me that. Von Seyfertitz. I know the difference between a sex symbol and a periscope. That ceiling, one minute ago. swallowed a long brass pipe, yes!?"

Von Seyfertitz glanced at his large, one-pound-size Christmas watch, saw that I still had thirty minutes to go, sighed, threw his cigarette down, squashed it with a polished boot, then clicked his heels.

Have you ever heard the *whack* when a real pro like Jack Nicklaus hits a ball? *Bamm*. A hard grenade!

That was the sound my Germanic friend's boots made as he knocked them together in a salute.

Crrrack!

"Gustav Mannerheim Auschlitz Von Seyfertitz, Baron Woldstein, at your service!" He lowered his voice. "Untererseaboat—"

I thought he might say "Doktor." But:

"Untererseaboat *Captain!*"

I scrambled off the floor.

Another *crrrack* and—

The periscope slid calmly down out of the ceiling, the most beautiful Freudian cigar I had ever seen.

"No!" I gasped.

"Have I ever *lied* to you?"

"Many times!"

"But"—he shrugged—"little white ones."

He stepped to the periscope, slapped two handles in place, slammed one eye shut, and crammed the other angrily against the viewpiece, turning the periscope in a slow roundabout of the room, the couch and me.

"Fire one," he ordered.

I almost heard the torpedo leave its tube.

"Fire two!" he said.

And a second soundless and invisible bomb motored on its way to infinity.

Struck midships, I sank to the couch.

"You, you!" I said mindlessly. "It!" I pointed at the brass machine. "This!" I touched the couch. "Why?"

"Sit down," said Von Seyfertitz.

"I am."

"*Lie* down."

"I'd rather not," I said uneasily.

Von Seyfertitz turned the periscope so its top-most eye, raked at an angle, glared at me. It had a uncanny resemblance, in its glassy coldness, to his own fierce hawk's gaze.

His voice, from behind the periscope, echoed.

"So you want to know, eh, how Gustav Von Seyfertitz, Baron Woldstein, suffered to leave the col

ocean depths, depart his dear North Sea ship, flee his destroyed and beaten fatherland, to become the Unterderseaboat *Doktor*—”

“Now that you mention—”

“I never mention! I declare. And my declarations are sea-battle commands.”

“So I noticed ...”

“Shut up. Sit back—”

“Not just now ...” I said uneasily.

His heels knocked as he let his right hand spider to his top coat pocket and slip forth yet a fourth eye with which to fasten me: a bright, thin monocle which he screwed into his stare as if decupping a boiled egg. I winced. For now the monocle was part of his glare and regarded me with cold fire.

“Why the monocle?” I said.

“Idiot! It is to cover my *good* eye so that *neither* eye can see and my intuition is free to work!”

“Oh.” I said.

And he began his monologue. And as he talked I realized his need had been pent up, capped, for years, so he talked on and on, forgetting me.

And it was during this monologue that a strange thing occurred. I rose slowly to my feet as the Herr Doktor Von Seyfertitz circled, his long, slim cigar printing smoke cumuli on the air, which he reared like white Rorschach blots.

With each implantation of his foot, a word came out, and then another, in a sort of plodding grammar. Sometimes he stopped and stood poised with one leg raised and one word stopped in his mouth, to be turned on his tongue and examined. Then the shoe went down, the noun slid forth and the verb and object in good time.

Until at last, circling, I found myself in a chair, stunned, for I saw:

Herr Doktor Von Seyfertitz stretched on his couch, his long spider fingers laced on his chest.

“It has been no easy thing to come forth on land,” he sibilated. “Some days I was the jellyfish frozen. Others, the shore-strewn octopi, at *least* with tentacles, or the crayfish sucked back into my skull. But I have built my spine, year on year, and now I walk among the land men and survive.”

He paused to take a trembling breath, then continued:

“I moved in stages from the depths to a houseboat, to a wharf bungalow, to a shore-tent and then back to a canal in a city and at last to New York, an island surrounded by water, eh? But where, where in all this, I wondered, would a submarine commander find his place, his work, his mad love and activity?”

“It was one afternoon in a building with the world’s longest elevator that it struck me like a hand grenade in the ganglion. Going down, down, down, other people crushed around me, and the number descending and the floors whizzing by the glass windows, rushing by flicker-flash, flicker-flash, conscious, subconscious, id, ego-id, life, death, lust, kill, lust, dark, light, plummeting, falling, ninety, eighty, fifty, lower depths, high exhilaration, id, ego, id, until this shout blazed from my raw throat: a great all-accepting, panic-manic shriek:

“‘Dive! Dive!’”

“I remember,” I said.

“‘Dive!’ I screamed so loudly that my fellow passengers, in shock, peed merrily. Among stunned faces, I stepped out of the lift to find one-sixteenth of an inch of pee on the floor. ‘Have a nice day!’ I said, jubilant with self-discovery, then ran to self-employment, to hang a shingle and next morning a periscope, carried from the mutilated, divested, castrated unterderseaboat all these years. Too stupid to see in it my psychological future and my final downfall, my beautiful artifact, the brass genitalia

psychotic research, the Von Seyfertz Mark Nine Periscope!”

“That’s quite a story,” I said.

“Damn right,” snorted the alienist, eyes shut. “And more than half of it true. Did you listen? What have you learned?”

“That more submarine captains should become psychiatrists.”

“So? I have often wondered: did Nemo really die when his submarine was destroyed? Or did he run off to become my great-grandfather and were his psychological bacteria passed along until I came in the world, thinking to command the ghostlike mechanisms that haunt the undertides, to wind up with the fifty-minute vaudeville routine in this sad, psychotic city?”

I got up and touched the fabulous brass symbol that hung like a scientific stalactite in mid-ceiling.

“May I look?”

“I wouldn’t if I were you.” He only half heard me, lying in the midst of his depression as in a dark cloud.

“It’s only a periscope—”

“But a good cigar is a smoke.”

I remembered Sigmund Freud’s quote about cigars, laughed, and touched the periscope again.

“Don’t!” he said.

“Well, you don’t *actually* use this for anything, do you? It’s just a remembrance of your past, from your last sub, yes?”

“You think that?” He sighed. “Look!”

I hesitated, then pasted one eye to the viewer, shut the other, and cried:

“Oh, Jesus!”

“I warned you!” said Von Seyfertz.

For *they* were there.

Enough nightmares to paper a thousand cinema screens. Enough phantoms to haunt ten thousand castle walls. Enough panics to shake forty cities into ruin.

My God, I thought, he could sell the film rights to this worldwide!

The first psychological kaleidoscope in history.

And in the instant another thought came: how much of that stuff in there is me? Or Von Seyfertz? Or both? Are these strange shapes my maundering daymares, sneezed out in the past weeks? When I talked, eyes shut, did my mouth spray invisible founts of small beasts which, caught in the periscope chambers, grew outsize? Like the microscopic photos of those germs that hide in eyebrows and pores magnified a million times to become elephants on *Scientific American* covers? Are these images from other lost souls trapped on that couch and caught in the submarine device, or leftovers from my eyelashes and psyche?

“It’s worth millions!” I cried. “Do you *know* what this is!?”

“Collected spiders, Gila monsters, trips to the Moon without gossamer wings, iguanas, toads out of bad sisters’ mouths, diamonds out of good fairies’ ears, crippled shadow dancers from Bali, cut-string puppets from Geppetto’s attic, little-boy statues that pee white wine, sexual trapeze performers’ *allegro*, obscene finger-pantomimes, evil clown faces, gargoyles that talk when it rains and whisper when the wind rises, basement bins full of poisoned honey, dragonflies that sew up every fourteen-year-old’s orifices to keep them neat until they rip the sutures, aged eighteen. Towers with mad witches’ garrets with mummies for lumber—”

He ran out of steam.

“You get the general drift.”

“Nuts,” I said. “You’re bored. I could get you a five-million-dollar deal with Amalgamated Fruitcakes Inc. And the Sigmund F. Dreamboats, split three ways!”

“You don’t understand,” said Von Seyfertitz. “I am keeping myself busy, busy, so I won’t remember all the people I torpedoed, sank, drowned mid-Atlantic in 1944. I am not in the Amalgamated Fruitcake Cinema business. I only wish to keep myself occupied by paring fingernails, cleaning earwax, and erasing inkblots from odd bean-bags like you. If I stop, I will fly apart. The periscope contains all and everything I have seen and known in the past forty years of observing pecans, cashews, and almonds. By staring at them I lose my own terrible life lost in the tides. If you won my periscope in some shoddy fly-by-night Hollywood strip poker, I would sink three times in my waterbed, never to be seen again. Have I *shown* you my waterbed? Three times as large as any pool. I do eighty laps asleep each night. Sometimes forty when I catnap noons. To answer your millionfold offer, no.”

And suddenly he shivered all over. His hands clutched at his heart.

“My God!” he shouted.

Too late, he was realizing he had let me step into his mind and life. Now he was on his feet between me and the periscope, staring at it and me, as if we were both terrors.

“You saw nothing in that! Nothing at all!”

“I did!”

“You lie! How could you *be* such a liar? Do you know what would happen if this got out, if you ran around making accusations—?”

“My God,” he raved on, “If the world knew, if someone said”—His words gummed shut in his mouth as if he were tasting the truth of what he said, as if he saw me for the first time and I was a gun fired full in his face. “I would be ... laughed out of the city. Such a goddamn ridiculous ... hey, wait a minute. You!”

It was as if he had slipped a devil mask over his face. His eyes grew wide. His mouth gaped.

I examined his face and saw murder. I sidled toward the door.

“You wouldn’t say anything to anyone?” he said.

“No.”

“How come you suddenly know *everything* about me?”

“You *told* me!”

“Yes,” he admitted, dazed, looking around for a weapon. “Wait.”

“If you don’t mind,” I said, “I’d rather not.”

And I was out the door and down the hall, my knees jumping to knock my jaw.

“Come back!” cried Von Seyfertitz, behind me. “I must kill you!”

“I was afraid of that!”

I reached the elevator first and by a miracle it flung wide its doors when I banged the Down button. I jumped in.

“Say good-bye!” cried Von Seyfertitz, raising his fist as if it held a bomb.

“Good-bye!” I said. The doors slammed.

I did not see Von Seyfertitz again for a year.

Meanwhile, I dined out often, not without guilt, telling friends, and strangers on street corners, my collision with a submarine commander become phrenologist (he who feels your skull to count the beans).

So with my giving one shake of the ripe fruit tree, nuts fell. Overnight they brimmed the Baron’s lap to flood his bank account. His Grand Slam will be recalled at century’s end: appearances on *PH*

Donahue, Oprah Winfrey, and Geraldo in one single cyclonic afternoon, with interchangeable hyperboles, positive-negative-positive every hour. There were Von Seyfertitz laser games and duplicates of his submarine periscope sold at the Museum of Modern Art and the Smithsonian. With the superinducement of a half-million dollars, he force-fed and easily sold a bad book. Duplicates of the animalcules, lurks, and curious critters trapped in his brass viewer arose in pop-up coloring book, paste-on tattoos, and inkpad rubber-stamp nightmares at Beasts-R-Us.

I had hoped that all this would cause him to forgive and forget. No.

One noon a year and a month later, my doorbell rang and there stood Gustav Von Seyfertitz, Baron Woldstein, tears streaming down his cheeks.

“How come I didn’t kill you that day?” he mourned.

“You didn’t catch me,” I said.

“Oh, *ja*. That was it.”

I looked into the old man’s rain-washed, tear-ravened face and said. “Who died?”

“Me. Or is it *I*? Ah, to hell with it: *me*. You see before you,” he grieved, “a creature who suffered from the Rumpelstiltskin Syndrome!”

“Rumpel—”

“—stiltskin! Two halves with a rip from chin to fly. Yank my forelock, go ahead! Watch me fall apart at the seam. Like zipping a psychotic zipper, I fall, two Herr Doktor Admirals for the sick price of one. And which is the Doktor who heals and which the sellout best-seller Admiral? It takes two mirrors to tell. Not to mention the smoke!”

He stopped and looked around, holding his head together with his hands.

“Can you see the crack? Am I splitting again to become this crazy sailor who desires richness and fame, being sieved through the hands of crazed ladies with ruptured libidos? Suffering cat-fish, I catch them! But take their money, spit, and spend! You should *have* such a year. Don’t laugh.”

“I’m not laughing.”

“Then cheer up while I finish. Can I lie down? Is that a couch? Too short. What do I do with my legs?”

“Sit sidesaddle.”

Von Seyfertitz laid himself out with his legs draped over one side. “Hey, not bad. Sit behind. Don’t look over my shoulder. Avert your gaze. Neither smirk nor pull long faces as I get out the crazy-glue and paste Rumpel back with Stiltskin, the name of my next book, God help me. Damn you to hell, you and your damned periscope!”

“Not mine. Yours. You wanted me to discover it that day. I suppose you had been whispering Dive! Dive, for years to patients, half asleep. But you couldn’t resist the loudest scream ever: Dive! That was your captain speaking, wanting fame and money enough to chock a horse show.”

“God,” murmured Von Seyfertitz, “How I hate it when you’re honest. Feeling better already. How much do I owe you?”

He arose.

“Now we go kill the monsters instead of you.”

“Monsters?”

“At my office. If we can get in past the lunatics.”

“You have lunatics outside as well as in, now?”

“Have I ever lied to you?”

“Often. But,” I added, “little white ones.”

“Come,” he said.

~~We got out of the elevator to be confronted by a long line of worshippers and supplicants. There must have been seventy people strung out between the elevator and the Baron's door, waiting with copies of books by Madame Blavatsky, Krishnamurti, and Shirley MacLaine under their arms. There was a roar like a suddenly opened furnace door when they saw the Baron. We beat it on the double and got inside his office before anyone could surge to follow.~~

"See what you have done to me!" Von Seyfertitz pointed.

The office walls were covered with expensive teak paneling. The desk was from Napoleon's age, an exquisite Empire piece worth at least fifty thousand dollars. The couch was the best soft leather I had ever seen, and the two pictures on the wall were originals—a Renoir and a Monet. My God, millions, I thought.

"Okay," I said. "The beasts, you said. You'll kill them, not me?"

The old man wiped his eyes with the back of one hand, then made a fist.

"Yes!" he cried, stepping up to the fine periscope, which reflected his face, madly distorted, in an elongated shape. "Like this. Thus and so!"

And before I could prevent, he gave the brass machine a terrific slap with his hand and then a blow and another blow and another, with both fists, cursing. Then he grabbed the periscope as if it were the neck of a spoiled child and throttled and shook it.

I cannot say what I heard in that instant. Perhaps real sounds, perhaps imagined temblors, like a glacier cracking in the spring, or icicles in mid-night. Perhaps it was a sound like a great kite breaking its skeleton in the wind and collapsing in folds of tissue. Maybe I thought I heard a vast breath inhaled, a cloud dissolving up inside itself. Or did I sense clock machineries spun so wildly they smoked off their foundations and fell like brass snowflakes?

I put my eye to the periscope.

I looked in upon—

Nothing.

It was just a brass tube with some crystal lenses and a view of an empty couch.

No more.

I seized the viewpiece and tried to screw it into some new focus on a far place and some dream of bacteria that might fibrillate across an unimaginable horizon.

But the couch remained only a couch, and the wall beyond looked back at me with its great blank face.

Von Seyfertitz leaned forward and a tear ran off the tip of his nose to fall on one rusted fist.

"Are they dead?" he whispered.

"Gone."

"Good, they deserved to die. Now I can return to some kind of normal, sane world."

And with each word his voice fell deeper within his throat, his chest, his soul, until it, like the vaporous haunts within the peri-kaleidoscope, melted into silence.

He clenched his fists together in a fierce clasp of prayer, like one who beseeches God to deliver him from plagues. And whether he was once again praying for my death, eyes shut, or whether he simply wished me gone with the visions within the brass device, I could not say.

I only knew that my gossip had done a terrible and irrevocable thing. Me and my wild enthusiasms for a psychological future and the fame of this incredible captain from beneath Nemo's tidal seas.

"Gone," murmured Gustav Von Seyfertitz, Baron Woldstein, whispered for the last time. "Gone."

That was almost the end.

I went around a month later. The landlord reluctantly let me look over the premises, mostly because I hinted that I might be renting.

We stood in the middle of the empty room where I could see the dent marks where the couch had once stood.

I looked up at the ceiling. It was empty.

“What’s wrong?” said the landlord. “Didn’t they fix it so you can’t see? Damn fool Baron made a damn big hole up into the office above. Rented that, too, but never used it for anything I knew of. There was just that big damn hole he left when he went away.”

I sighed with relief.

“Nothing left upstairs?”

“Nothing.”

I looked up at the perfectly blank ceiling.

“Nice job of repair,” I said.

“Thank God,” said the landlord.

What, I often wonder, ever happened to Gustav Von Seyfertitz? Did he move to Vienna, to take up residence, perhaps, in or near dear Sigmund’s very own address? Does he live in Rio, aerating fellow Unterderseaboat Captains who can’t sleep for seasickness, roiling on their waterbeds under the shadow of the Andes Cross? Or is he in South Pasadena, within striking distance of the fruit larder nut farm disguised as film studios?

I cannot guess.

All I know is that some nights in the year, oh, once or twice, in a deep sleep I hear this terrible shout, his cry,

“Dive! Dive! Dive!”

And wake to find myself, sweating, far under my bed.

Zaharoff/Richter Mark V

In the twilight just before sunrise, it was the most ordinary-looking building he had seen since the chicken farm of his youth. It stood in the middle of an empty field full of cricket weeds and cac mostly dust and some neglected footpaths in the half darkness.

Charlie Crowe left the Rolls-Royce engine running at the curb behind him and babbled going along the shadowed path, leading the way for Hank Gibson, who glanced back at the gently purring car.

“Shouldn’t you—”

“No, no,” Charlie Crowe cut in. “No one would steal a Rolls-Royce, now, would they? How fast would they get, to the next corner? Before someone else stole it from *them!* Come along!”

“What’s the hurry, we’ve got all morning!”

“That’s what you think, chum. We’ve got—” Charlie Crowe eyed his watch. “Twenty minutes maybe fifteen for the fast tour, the coming disaster, the revelations, the whole bit!”

“Don’t talk so fast and slow down, you’ll give me a heart attack.”

“Save it for breakfast. Here. Put this in your pocket.”

Hank Gibson looked at the coupon-green diploma.

“Insurance?”

“On your house, as of yesterday.”

“But we don’t need—”

“Yes, you do, but don’t know it. Sign the duplicate. Here. Can you see? Here’s my flashlight and my pen. Thatsa boy. Give one to me. One for you—”

“Christ—”

“No swearing. You’re all protected now, no matter what. Jig time.”

And before he knew it, Hank Gibson was elbow-fetched through a paint-flaked door inside to yet another locked door, which opened when Charlie Crowe pointed his electric laser at it. They stepped into—

“An elevator! What’s an elevator doing in a shack in an empty lot at five in the morning—”

“Hush.”

The floor sank under them and they traveled what might have been seventy or eighty feet straight down to where another door whispered aside and they stepped out into a long hall of a dozen doors on each side with a few dozen pleasantly glowing lights above. Before he could exclaim again, Hank Gibson was hustled past these doors that bore the names of cities and countries.

“Damn,” cried Hank Gibson, “I hate being rushed through one god-awful mystery after another. I’m working on a novel and a feature for my newspaper. I’ve no time—”

“For the biggest story in the world? Bosh! You and I will write it, share the profits! You can’t resist. Calamities. Chaos. Holocausts!”

“You were always great for hyperbole—”

“Quiet. It’s my turn to show and tell.” Charlie Crowe displayed his wristwatch. “We’re wasting time. Where do we start?” He waved at the two dozen shut doors surrounding them with labels marked CONSTANTINOPLE, MEXICO CITY, LIMA, SAN FRANCISCO on one side.

Eighteen ninety-seven, 1914, 1938, 1963 on the other. Also, a special door marked HAUSSMAN 1870.

“Places and dates, dates and places. How in hell should I know why or how to choose?”

~~“Don’t these cities and dates ring any bells, stir any dust? Peek here. Glance there. Go on.”~~

Hank Gibson peeked.

To one side, through a glass window on the topmost part of a door marked 1789, he saw:

“Looks like Paris.”

“Press the button there under the glass.”

Hank Gibson pressed the button.

“Now look!”

Hank Gibson looked.

“My God, Paris. In flames. And there’s the guillotine!”

“Correct. Now. Next door. Next window.”

Hank Gibson moved and peeked.

“Paris again, by God. Do I press the button?”

“Why not?”

He pressed.

“Jesus, it’s still burning. But this time it’s 1870. The Commune?”

“Paris fighting Hessians *outside* the city, Parisians killing Parisians *inside* the city. Nothing like the French, eh? Move!”

They reached a third window. Gibson peered.

“Paris. But *not* burning. There go the taxicabs. I know. Nineteen sixteen. Paris saved by one thousand Paris taxis carrying troops to fend off the Germans outside the city!”

“A-One! Next?”

At a fourth window.

“Paris intact. But over here. Dresden? Berlin? London? All destroyed.”

“Right. How do you like the three-dimension virtual reality? Superb! Enough of cities and war. Across the hall. Go down the line. All those doors with different kinds of devastation.”

“Mexico City? I was there once, in ’46.”

“Press.”

Hank Gibson pressed the button.

The city fell, shook, fell.

“The earthquake of ‘84?”

“Eight-five, to be exact.”

“Christ, those poor people. Bad enough they’re poor. But thousands killed, maimed, made poorer. And the government—”

“Not giving a damn. Move.”

They stopped at a door marked ARMENIA, 1988.

Gibson squinted in, pressed the button.

“Major country, Armenia. Major country—gone.”

“Biggest quake in that territory in half a century.”

They paused at two more windows: TOKYO, 1932, and SAN FRANCISCO, 1905. Both whole, entirely intact at first glance. Touch the button: all fall down!

Gibson turned away, shaken and pale.

“Well?” said his friend Charlie. “What’s the sum?”

Gibson stared along the hall to left and right.

“War and Peace? Or Peace destroying itself without War?”

“Touche!”

“Why are you showing me all this?”

“For your future and mine, untold riches, incredible revelations, amazing truths. *Andal Vamoose!*”

Charlie Crowe flashed his laser pen at the largest door at the far end of the hall. The double door hissed; the door sank away to one side, revealing a large boardroom with a huge table forty feet in length, surrounded by twenty leather chairs on each side and something like a throne, somewhat elevated, at the far end.

“Go sit up at the end,” said Charlie.

Hank Gibson moved slowly.

“Oh, for Christ sake, shake a leg. We’ve only seven more minutes before the end of the world.”

“End—?”

“Just joking. Ready?”

Hank Gibson sat. “Fire away.”

The table, the chairs, and the room shook.

Gibson leaped up.

“What was that?”

“Nothing.” Charlie Crowe checked his watch. “At least not yet. Sit back. What have you seen?”

Gibson settled in his chair uneasily, grasping the arms. “Damned if I know. History?”

“Yes, but what *kind*?”

“War and Peace. Peace and War. Bad Peace, of course. Earthquakes and fire.”

“Admirable. Now, who’s responsible for all that destruction, two kinds?”

“What, *war*? Politicians, I guess. Ethnic mobs. Greed. Jealousy. Munitions manufacturers. The Krupp works in Germany. Zaharoff, wasn’t that his name? The big munitions king, the grand muller of all the warmongers, films of him on the newsreels in cinemas when I was a kid. Zaharoff?”

“Yes! What about the other side of the hall? The earthquakes.”

“God did it.”

“Only God? No helpers?”

“How can anyone help an earthquake?”

“Partially. Indirectly. Collaboratively.”

“An earthquake is an earthquake. A city just happens to be in its way. Underfoot.”

“Wrong, Hank.”

“Wrong!?”

“What if I told you that those cities were not accidentally built there? What if I told you we had planned to build them there, on purpose, to be destroyed?”

“Nuts!”

“No, Hank, creative annihilation. We were up to these tricks as far back as the Tang dynasty, earthquakewise on the one hand. Citywise? Paris, 1789 *warwise*.”

“We? We? Who’s *we*?”

“Me, Hank, and my cohorts, not in crimson and gold, but good dark cloth and decent ties and fine architectural school graduates. We did it, Hank. We built the cities so as to tear them down. To knock them apart with earthquakes or kill them with bombs and war, war and bombs.”

“We? *We!*?”

“In this room or rooms like it, all across the world, men sat in those chairs on the left and right with the grand mucky-muck of all architects there where you sit—”

“Architects!”

“~~You don’t think all of those earthquakes, all of those wars, happened by mere accident, pure chance? We did it. Hank, the blueprint urban-plan architects of the world. Not the munitions makers or politicians, oh, we used them as puppets, marionettes, useful idiots, but we, the superb hired city architects, set out to build and then destroy our pets, our buildings, our cities!~~”

“For God’s sake, how insane! Why?”

“Why? So that every forty, fifty, sixty, ninety years we could start over with fresh projects, new concepts, renewed jobs, cash on the line for everyone—blueprinters, planners, craftsmen, builders, stonemasons, diggers, carpenters, glaziers, gardeners. Knock it all down, start new!”

“You mean you—?”

“Studied where the earthquakes hid, where they might erupt, every seam, crack, and fault in every territory, stage, land in the world! That’s where we built the cities! Or *most* of them.”

“B.S.! You couldn’t do that, you and your planners! People would find out!”

“They never knew or found out. We met in secret, covered our tracks. A small klan, a wee band of conspirators in every country in every age. Like the Masons, eh? Or some Inquisitional Catholic sect. Or an underground Muslim grot. It doesn’t take many or much. And the average politician, dumb or stupid, took our word for it. *This* is the site, here’s the very place, plant your capital here, your town there. Perfectly safe. Until the next quake, eh, Hank?”

“Poppycock!”

“Watch your language!”

“I refuse to believe—”

The room shook. The chairs trembled. Half out of his chair, Hank Gibson sank back. The color drained from his face sank, too.

“Two minutes to go,” said Charlie Crowe. “Shall I talk fast? Well, you don’t think the destiny of the world would be left to your ordinary farm-beast politico, do you? Have you ever sat at a Rotary/Lions lunch with those sweet imbecile Chamber of Commerce stallions? Sleep and dream. Would you let the world jog along with Zaharoff and his gun-maker-powder experts? Hell, no. They only know how to fire steel and package nitro. So *our* people, the same people who built the cities on the earthquake fault lines to ensure new work to build more cities, we planned the wars, secretly.

“We provoked, guided, steered, influenced the politicians to boil over, one way or t’other, and Paris and the Terror followed, dogged by Napoleon, trailed by the Paris Commune in which Haussmann taking advantage of the chaos, tore down and rebuilt the City to the madness of some, delight of others. Consider Dresden, London, Tokyo, Hiroshima. We architects paid cold cash to get Hitler out of jail in 1922! Then we architects mosquito-pestered the Japanese to invade Manchuria, import junk iron, antagonize Roosevelt, bomb Pearl Harbor. Sure, the Emperor approved, sure the Generals kneed delight, sure the kamikazes took off for oblivion, joyously happy. But behind the scenes, we architects, clapping hands, rubbing palms for the *moola*, shoved them up! Not the politicians, not the military, not the arms merchants, but the sons of Haussmann and the future sons of Frank Lloyd Wright sent them on their way. Glory hallelujah!”

Hank Gibson exhaled a great gust and sat, weighted with an ounce of information and a ton of confusion, at the head of this table. He stared down its length.

“There were meetings here—”

“In 1932, 1936, 1939 to fester Tokyo, poison Washington for war. And at the same time make sure that San Francisco was built in the best way for a new downfall, and that California cities all up and down the cracks and seams nursed at the mother fault, San Andreas, so when the Big One came,

would rain money for forty days.”

“Son of a bitch,” said Hank Gibson.

“Yes, aren’t I? Aren’t we?”

“Son of a bitch,” Hank Gibson repeated in a whisper. “Man’s wars and God’s earthquakes.”

“What a collaboration, eh? All done by the secret government, the government of surprise architects across the world and into the next century.”

The floor shook. The table and the chair and the ceiling did likewise.

“Time?” said Hank Gibson.

Charlie Crowe laughed, glancing at his watch.

“Time. Out!”

They ran for the door, ran down the hall past the doors marked TOKYO and LONDON and DRESDE past the doors marked 1789 and 1870 and 1940 and past the doors marked ARMENIA and MEXICO CITY and SAN FRANCISCO and shot up in the elevator, and along the way, Hank Gibson said:

“Again, why’ve you *told* me this?”

“I’m retiring. The others are gone. We won’t use this place again. It’ll be gone. Maybe *now*. You write the book about all this fabulous stuff, I edit it, we’ll grab the money and run.”

“But who’ll *believe* it!?”

“No one. But it’s so sensational, everyone will buy. Millions of copies. And no one will investigate for they’re all guilty, city fathers, Chambers of Commerce, real estate salesmen, Army generals who thought they made up and fought their own wars, or made up and built their own cities! Pomposity freaks! Here we are. Out.”

They made it out of the elevator and the shack as the next quake came. Both fell and got up, with nervous laughter.

“Good old California, yes? Is my Rolls still there? Yep. No carjackers. In!”

With his hand on the Rolls doorframe, Gibson stared over at his friend. “Does the San Andreas Fault come through *this* block?”

“You better believe. Wanna go see your home?”

Gibson shut his eyes. “Christ, I’m afraid.”

“Take courage from the insurance policy in your coat pocket. Shall we go?”

“In a moment.” Gibson swallowed hard. “What will we name our book?”

“What time is it and date?”

Gibson looked at the sun about to rise. “Early. Six-thirty. And the date on my watch reads February fifth.”

“Nineteen ninety-four?”

“Six-thirty a.m. February fifth, 1994.”

“Then that’s the title of our book. Or why not *Zaharoff*, add Richter for the earthquake Richter scale at Cal-Tech. *Zaharoff/Richter Mark V*? Okay?”

“Okay.”

The doors slammed. The motor roared.

“Do we go home?”

“Go fast. Jesus. Fast.”

They went.

Fast.

Remember Sascha?

Remember? Why, how could they forget? Although they knew him for only a little while, years later his name would arise and they would smile or even laugh and reach out to hold hands, remembering.

Sascha. What a tender, witty comrade, what a sly, hidden individual, what a child of talent; teller of tales, bon vivant, late-night companion, ever-present illumination on foggy noons.

Sascha!

He, whom they had never seen, to whom they spoke often at three a.m. in their small bedroom away from friends who might roll their eyeballs under their lids, doubting their sanity, hearing *his* name.

Well, then, who and what was Sascha, and where did they meet or perhaps only dream him, and who were *they*?

Quickly: they were Maggie and Douglas Spaulding and they lived by the loud sea and the war sand and the rickety bridges over the almost dead canals of Venice, California. Though lacking money in the bank or Goodwill furniture in their tiny two-room apartment, they were incredibly happy. Maggie was a writer, and she worked to support him while he finished the great American novel.

Their routine was: she would arrive home each night from downtown Los Angeles and he would have hamburgers waiting or they would walk down the beach to eat hot dogs, spend ten or twenty cents in the Penny Arcade, go home, make love, go to sleep, and repeat the whole wondrous routine the next night: hot dogs, Penny Arcade, love, sleep, work, etc. It was all glorious in that year of being very young and in love; therefore it would go on forever ...

Until *he* appeared.

The nameless one. For then he had no name. He had threatened to arrive a few months after the marriage to destroy their economy and scare off the novel, but then he had melted away, leaving only his echo of a threat.

But now the true collision loomed.

One night over a ham omelet with a bottle of cheap red and the conversation loping quietly, leaning on the card table and promising each other grander and more ebullient futures, Maggie suddenly said, "I feel faint."

"What?" said Douglas Spaulding.

"I've felt funny all day. And I was sick, a little bit, this morning."

"Oh, my God." He rose and came around the card table and took her head in his hands and pressed her brow against his side, and looked down at the beautiful part in her hair, suddenly smiling.

"Well, now," he said, "don't tell me that Sascha is back?"

"Sascha! Who's *that*?"

"When he arrives, he'll *tell* us."

"Where did that name *come* from?"

"Don't know. It's been in my mind all year."

"Sascha?" She pressed his hands to her cheeks, laughing. "Sascha!"

"Call the doctor tomorrow," he said.

"The doctor says Sascha has moved in for light housekeeping," she said over the phone the next

day.

“Great!” He stopped. “I *guess*.” He considered their bank deposits. “No. *First* thoughts count. Great! When do we meet the Martian invader?”

“October. He’s infinitesimal now, tiny, I can barely hear his voice. But now that he has a name, hear it. He promises to grow, if we take care.”

“The Fabulous Invalid! Shall I stock up on carrots, spinach, broccoli for *what* date?”

“Halloween.”

“Impossible!”

“True!”

“People will claim we planned him and my vampire book to arrive that week, things that go bump and cry in the night.”

“Oh, Sascha will surely do *that!* Happy?”

“Frightened, yes, but happy, Lord, yes. Come home, Mrs. Rabbit, and bring *him* along!”

It must be explained that Maggie and Douglas Spaulding were best described as crazed romantic. Long before the interior christening of Sascha, they, loving Laurel and Hardy, had called each other Stan and Ollie. The machines, the dustbusters and can openers around the apartment, had names, and did various parts of their anatomy, revealed to no one.

So Sascha, as an entity, a presence growing toward friendship, was not unusual. And when he actually began to speak up, they were not surprised. The gentle demands of their marriage, with love as currency instead of cash, made it inevitable.

Someday, they said, if they owned a car, it too would be named.

They spoke on that and a dozen score of things late at night. When hyperventilating about life, they propped themselves up on their pillows as if the future might happen right *now*. They waited, anticipating, in seance, for the silent small off-spring to speak his first words before dawn.

“I love our lives,” said Maggie, lying there, “all the games. I hope it never stops. You’re not like other men, who drink beer and talk poker. Dear God, I wonder, how many other marriages play like us?”

“No one, nowhere. Remember?”

“What?”

He lay back to trace his memory on the ceiling.

“The day we were married—”

“Yes!”

“Our friends driving and dropping us off here and we walked down to the drugstore by the pier and bought a tube of toothpaste and two toothbrushes, big bucks, for our honeymoon ...? One red toothbrush, one green, to decorate our empty bathroom. And on the way back along the beach, holding hands, suddenly, behind us, two little girls and a boy followed us and sang:

“*Happy marriage day to you,*

Happy marriage day to you.

Happy marriage day, happy marriage day,

Happy marriage day to you ...”

She sang it now, quietly. He chimed in, remembering how they had blushed with pleasure at the children’s voices, but walked on, feeling ridiculous but happy and wonderful.

“How did they guess? Did we *look* married?”

~~“It wasn’t our clothes! Our faces, don’t you think? Smiles that made our jaws ache. We were exploding. They got the concussion.”~~

“Those dear children. I can still hear their voices.”

“And so here we are, seventeen months later.” He put his arm around her and gazed at their future on the dark ceiling.

“And here *I* am,” a voice murmured.

“Who?” Douglas said.

“Me,” the voice whispered. “Sascha.”

Douglas looked down at his wife’s mouth, which had barely trembled.

“So, at last, you’ve decided to speak?” said Douglas.

“Yes,” came the whisper.

“We wondered,” said Douglas, “when we would hear from you.” He squeezed his wife gently.

“It’s time,” the voice murmured. “So here I am.”

“Welcome, Sascha,” both said.

“Why didn’t you talk sooner?” asked Douglas Spaulding.

“I wasn’t sure that you *liked* me,” the voice whispered.

“Why would you think *that*?”

“First I was, then I wasn’t. Once I was only a name. Remember, last year, I was ready to come and stay. Scared you.”

“We were broke,” said Douglas quietly. “And nervous.”

“What’s so scary about life?” said Sascha. Maggie’s lips twitched. “It’s that *other* thing. *Not* being ever. *Not* being wanted.”

“On the contrary.” Douglas Spaulding moved down on his pillow so he could watch his wife’s profile, her eyes shut, but her mouth breathing softly. “We love you. But last year it was bad timing. Understand?”

“No,” whispered Sascha. “I only understand you didn’t want me. And now you *do*. I should leave.”

“But you just *got* here!”

“Here I go, anyway.”

“Don’t, Sascha! Stay!”

“Good-bye.” The small voice faded. “Oh, good-bye.”

And then silence.

Maggie opened her eyes with quiet panic.

“Sascha’s gone,” she said.

“He *can*’t be!”

The room was still.

“*Can*’t be,” he said. “It’s only a game.”

“More than a game. Oh, God, I feel cold. Hold me.”

He moved to hug her.

“It’s okay.”

“No. I had the funniest feeling just now, as if he were real.”

“He *is*. He’s *not* gone.”

“Unless we do something. Help me.”

“Help?” He held her even tighter, then shut his eyes, and at last called:

“Sascha?”

Silence.

"I know you're there. You can't hide."

His hand moved to where Sascha might be.

"Listen. Say something. Don't scare us, Sascha. We don't want to be scared or scare you. We need each other. We three against the world. Sascha?"

Silence.

"Well?" whispered Douglas.

Maggie breathed in and out.

They waited.

"Yes?"

There was a soft flutter, the merest exhalation on the night air.

"Yes."

"You're back!" both cried.

Another silence.

"Welcome?" asked Sascha.

"Welcome!" both said.

And that night passed and the next day and the night and day after that, until there were many days but especially midnights when he dared to declare himself, pipe opinions, grow stronger and firmer and longer in half-heard declarations, as they lay in anticipatory awareness, now she moving her lips now he taking over, both open as warm, live ventriloquists' mouthpieces. The small voice shifted from one tongue to the other, with soft bouts of laughter at how ridiculous but loving it all seemed never knowing what Sascha might say next, but letting him speak on until dawn and a smiling sleep.

"What's this about Halloween?" he asked, somewhere in the sixth month.

"Halloween?" both wondered.

"Isn't that a death holiday?" Sascha murmured.

"Well, yes ..."

"I'm not sure I want to be born on a night like that."

"Well, what night *would* you like to be born on?"

Silence as Sascha floated a while.

"Guy Fawkes," he finally whispered.

"Guy Fawkes??!!"

"That's mainly fireworks, gunpowder plots, Houses of Parliament, yes? *Please to remember the fifth of November?*"

"Do you think you could wait until then?"

"I could try. I don't think I want to start out with skulls and bones. Gunpowder's more like it. I could write about that."

"Will you be a writer, then?"

"Get me a typewriter and a ream of paper."

"And keep us awake with the *typing?*"

"Pen, pencil, and pad, then?"

"Done!"

So it was agreed and the nights passed into weeks and the weeks leaned from summer into the first days of autumn and his voice grew stronger, as did the sound of his heart and the small commotions of his limbs. Sometimes as Maggie slept, his voice would stir her awake and she would reach up to touch

her mouth, where the surprise of his dreaming came forth.

“There, there, Sascha. Rest now. Sleep.”

“Sleep,” he whispered drowsily, “sleep.” And faded away.

“Pork chops, please, for supper.”

“No pickles with ice cream?” both said, almost at once.

“Pork chops,” he said, and more days passed and more dawns arose and he said: “Hamburgers!”

“For *breakfast*?”

“With onions,” he said.

October stood still for one day and then ...

Halloween departed.

“Thanks,” said Sascha, “for helping me past *that*. What’s up ahead in five nights?”

“Guy Fawkes!”

“Ah, yes!” he cried.

And at one minute after midnight five days later, Maggie got up, wandered to the bathroom, and wandered back, stunned.

“Dear,” she said, sitting on the edge of the bed.

Douglas Spaulding turned over, half awake. “Yes?”

“What day is it?” whispered Sascha.

“Guy Fawkes, at last. So?”

“I don’t feel well,” said Sascha. “Or, no, I feel fine. Full of pep. Ready to go. It’s time to say good-bye. Or is it hello? What *do* I mean?”

“Spit it out.”

“Are there neighbors who said, no matter when, they’d take us to the hospital?”

“Yes.”

“Call the neighbors,” said Sascha.

They called the neighbors.

At the hospital, Douglas kissed his wife’s brow and listened.

“It’s been nice,” said Sascha.

“Only the best.”

“We won’t talk again. Good-bye,” said Sascha.

“Good-bye,” both said.

At dawn there was a small clear cry somewhere.

Not long after, Douglas entered his wife’s hospital room. She looked at him and said, “Sascha gone.”

“I know,” he said quietly.

“But he left word and someone else is here. Look.”

He approached the bed as she pulled back a coverlet.

“Well, I’ll be damned.”

He looked down at a small pink face and eyes that for a brief moment flickered bright blue and then shut.

“Who’s that?” he asked.

“Your daughter. Meet Alexandra.”

“Hello, Alexandra,” he said.

“And do you know what the nickname for Alexandra is?” she said.

“What?”

“Sascha,” she said.

He touched the small cheek very gently.

“Hello, Sascha,” he said.

Another Fine Mess

The sounds began in the middle of summer in the middle of the night.

Bella Winters sat up in bed about three a.m. and listened and then lay back down. Ten minutes later she heard the sounds again, out in the night, down the hill.

Bella Winters lived in a first-floor apartment on top of Vendome Heights, near Effie Street in Los Angeles, and had lived there now for only a few days, so it was all new to her, this old house on an old street with an old staircase, made of concrete, climbing steeply straight up from the lowlands below. One hundred and twenty steps, count them. And right now ...

“Someone’s on the steps,” said Bella to herself.

“What?” said her husband, Sam, in his sleep.

“There are some men out on the steps,” said Bella. “Talking, yelling, not fighting, but almost. I heard them last night, too, and the night before, but ...”

“What?” Sam muttered.

“Shh, go to sleep. I’ll look.”

She got out of bed in the dark and went to the window, and yes, two men were indeed talking out there, grunting, groaning, now loud, now soft. And there was another noise, a kind of bumping and sliding, thumping, like a huge object being carted up the hill.

“No one could be moving in at this hour of the night, could they?” asked Bella of the darkness, through the window, and herself.

“No,” murmured Sam.

“It sounds like ...”

“Like what?” asked Sam, fully awake now.

“Like two men moving—”

“Moving what, for God’s sake?”

“Moving a piano. Up those steps.”

“At three in the *morning!*?”

“A piano and two men. Just listen.”

The husband sat up, blinking, alert.

Far off, in the middle of the hill, there was a kind of harping strum, the noise a piano makes when it suddenly thumped and its harp strings hum.

“There, did you *hear?*?”

“Jesus, you’re right. But why would anyone steal—”

“They’re not stealing, they’re delivering.”

“A *piano?*?”

“I didn’t make the rules, Sam. Go out and ask. No. don’t; I will.”

And she wrapped herself in her robe and was out the door and on the sidewalk.

“Bella,” Sam whispered fiercely behind the porch screen. “Crazy.”

“So what can happen at night to a woman fifty-five, fat, and ugly?” she wondered.

Sam did not answer.

She moved quietly to the rim of the hill. Somewhere down there she could hear the two men wrestling with a huge object. The piano on occasion gave a strumming hum and fell silent.

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