

A Scent of Sarsaparilla

Ray Bradbury

Mr. William Finch stood quietly in the dark and blowing attic all morning and afternoon for three days. For three days in late November, he stood alone, feeling the soft white flakes of Time falling out of the infinite cold steel sky, silently, softly, feathering the roof and powdering the eaves. He stood, eyes shut. The attic, wallowed in seas of wind in the long sunless days, creaked every bone and shook down ancient dusts from its beams and warped timbers and lathings. It was a mass of sighs and torments that ached all about him where he stood sniffing its elegant dry perfumes and feeling of its ancient heritages. Ah. Ah.

Listening, downstairs, his wife Cora could not hear him walk or shift or twitch. She imagined she could only hear him breathe, slowly out and in, like a dusty bellows, alone up there in the attic, high in the windy house. "Ridiculous," she muttered.

When he hurried down for lunch the third afternoon, he smiled at the bleak walls, the chipped plates, the scratched silverware, and even at his wife! "What's all the excitement?" she demanded.

"Good spirits is all. Wonderful spirits!" he laughed. He seemed almost hysterical with joy. He was seething in a great warm ferment which, obviously, he had trouble concealing. His wife frowned.

"What's that smell?"

“Smell, smell, smell?”

“Sarsaparilla.” She sniffed suspiciously. “That’s what it is!” “Oh, it couldn’t be!” His hysterical happiness stopped as quickly as if she’d switched him off. He seemed stunned, ill at ease, and suddenly very careful. “Where did you go this morning?” she asked.

“You know I was cleaning the attic.”

“Mooning over a lot of trash. I didn’t hear a sound. Thought maybe you weren’t in the attic at all. What’s that?” She pointed.

“Well, now how did those get there?” he asked the world. He peered down at the pair of black spring-metal bicycle clips that bound his thin pants cuffs to his bony ankles.

“Found them in the attic,” he answered himself. “Remember when we got out on the gravel road in the early morning on our tandem bike, Cora, forty years ago, everything fresh and new?”

“If you don’t finish that attic today, I’ll come up and toss everything out myself.”

“Oh, no,” he cried. “I have everything the way I want it!”

She looked at him coldly.

“Cora,” he said, eating his lunch, relaxing, beginning to enthuse again, “You know what attics are? They’re Time Machines, in which old, dim-witted men like me can travel back forty years to a time when it was summer all year round and children raided ice wagons. Remember how it tasted? You held the ice in your handkerchief. It was like sucking the flavor of linen and snow at the same time.”

Cora fidgeted.

It’s not impossible, he thought, half closing his eyes, trying to see it and build it. Consider an attic. Its very atmosphere is Time. It deals in other years, the cocoons and chrysalises of another age. All the bureau drawers are little coffins where a thousand yesterdays lie in state. Oh, the attic’s a dark, friendly place, full of Time, and if you stand in the very center of it, straight and tall, squinting your eyes, and thinking and thinking, and smelling the Past, and putting out your hands to feel of Long Ago, why, it . . . He stopped, realizing he had spoken some of this aloud. Cora was eating rapidly. “Well, wouldn’t it be interesting,” he asked the part in her hair, “if Time Travel could occur? And what more logical, proper place for it to happen than in an attic like ours, eh?”

“It’s not always summer back in the old days,” she said. “It’s just your crazy memory. You remember all the good things and forget the bad. It wasn’t always summer.”

“Figuratively speaking, Cora, it was.”

“Wasn’t.”

“What I mean is this,” he said, whispering excitedly, bending forward to see the image he was tracing on the blank dining-room wall. “If you rode your unicycle carefully between the years, balancing, hands out, careful, careful, if you rode from year to year, spent a week in 1909, a day in 1900, a month or a fortnight somewhere else, 1905, 1898, you could stay with summer the rest of your life.” “Unicycle?”

“You know, one of those tall chromium one-wheeled bikes, single-seater, the performers ride in vaudeville shows, juggling. Balance, true balance, it takes, not to fall off, to keep the bright objects flying in the air, beautiful, up and up, a light, a flash, a sparkle, a bomb of brilliant colors, red, yellow, blue, green, white, gold; all the Junes and Julys and Augusts that ever were, in the air, about you, at once, hardly touching your bands, flying, suspended, and you, smiling, among them. Balance, Cora, balance.”

“Blah,” she said, “blah, blah.” And added, “blah!”

He climbed the long cold stairs to the attic, shivering. There were nights in winter when he woke with porcelain in his bones, with cool chimes blowing in his ears, with frost piercing his nerves in a raw illumination like white-cold fireworks exploding and showering down in flaming snows upon a silent land deep in his subconscious. He was cold, cold, cold, and it would take a score of endless summers, with their green torches and bronze suns to thaw him free of his wintry sheath. He was a great tasteless chunk of brittle ice, a snowman put to bed each night, full of confetti dreams, tumbles of crystal and flurry. And there lay winter outside forever, a great leaden wine press smashing down its colorless lid of sky, squashing them all like so many grapes, mashing color and sense and being from everyone, save the children who fled on skis and toboggans down mirrored hills which reflected the crushing iron shield that hung lower above town each day and every eternal night.

Mr. Finch lifted the attic trap door. But here, here. A dust of summer sprang up about him. The attic dust simmered with heat left over from other seasons. Quietly, he shut the trap door down.

He began to smile.

The attic was quiet as a thundercloud before a storm. On occasion, Cora Finch heard her husband murmuring, murmuring, high up there. At five in the afternoon, singing My Isle of Golden Dreams, Mr. Finch flipped a crisp new straw hat in the kitchen door. “Boo!”

“Did you sleep all afternoon?” snapped his wife. “I called up at you four times and no answer.”

“Sleep?” He considered this and laughed, then put his hand quickly over his mouth. “Well, I guess I did.”

Suddenly she saw him. “My God!” she cried, “where’d you get that coat?” He wore a red candy-striped coat, a high white, choking collar and ice cream pants. You could smell the straw hat like a handful of fresh hay fanned in the air.

“Found ‘em in an old trunk.”

She sniffed. “Don’t smell of moth balls. Looks brand-new.” “Oh, no!” he said hastily. He looked stiff and uncomfortable as she eyed his costume.

“This isn’t a summer-stock company,” she said.

“Can’t a fellow have a little fun?”

“That’s all you’ve ever had,” she slammed the oven door. “While I’ve stayed home and knitted, Lord knows, you’ve been down at the store helping ladies’ elbows in and out doors.”

He refused to be bothered. “Cora.” He looked deep into the crackling straw hat. “Wouldn’t it be nice to take a Sunday walk the way we used to do, with your silk parasol and your long dress whisking along,

and sit on those wirelegged chairs at the soda parlor and smell the drugstore the way they used to smell? Why don't drugstores smell that way any more? And order two sarsaparillas for us, Cora, and then ride out in our 1910 Ford to Hannahan's Pier for a box supper and listen to the brass band. How about it?"

"Supper's ready. Take that dreadful uniform off."

"If you could make a wish and take a ride on those oak-laned country roads like they had before cars started rushing, would you do it?" he insisted, watching her.

"Those old roads were dirty. We came home looking like Africans. Anyway," she picked up a sugar jar and shook it, "this morning I had forty dollars here. Now it's gone! Don't tell me you ordered those clothes from a costume house. They're brand-new; they didn't come from any trunk!"

"I'm—" he said.

She raved for half an hour, but he could not bring himself to say anything. The November wind shook the house and as she talked, the snows of winter began to fall again in the cold steel sky.

"Answer me!" she cried. "Are you crazy, spending our money that way, on clothes you can't wear?"

"The attic," he started to say.

She walked off and sat in the living room.

The snow was falling fast now and it was a cold dark November evening. She heard him climb up the stepladder, slowly, into the attic, into that dusty place of other years, into that black place of costumes and props and Time, into a world separate from this world below.

He closed the trap door down. The flashlight, snapped on, was company enough. Yes, here was all of Time compressed in a Japanese paper flower. At the touch of memory, everything would unfold into the clear water of the mind, in beautiful blooms, in spring breezes, larger than life. Each of the bureau drawers slid forth, might contain aunts and cousins and grandmamas, ermined in dust. Yes, Time was here. You could feel it breathing, an atmospheric instead of a mechanical clock.

Now the house below was as remote as another day in the past. He half shut his eyes and looked and looked on every side of the waiting attic. Here, in prised chandelier, were rainbows and mornings and noons as bright as new rivers flowing endlessly back through time. His flashlight caught and flickered them alive, the rainbows leapt up to curve the shadows back with colors, with colors like plums and strawberries and Concord grapes, with colors like cut lemons and the sky where the clouds drew off after storming and the blue was there. And the dust of the attic was incense burning and all of time burning, and all you need do was peer into the flames. It was indeed a great machine of Time, this attic, he knew, he felt, he was sure, and if you touched prisms here, doorknobs there, plucked tassels, chimed crystals, swirled dust, punched trunk hasps and gusted the vox humana of the old hearth bellows until it puffed the soot of a thousand ancient fires into your eyes, if, indeed, you played this instrument, this warm machine of parts, if you fondled all of its bits and pieces, its levers and changers and movers, then, then, then! He thrust out his hands to orchestrate, to conduct, to flourish. There was music in his head, in his mouth shut tight, and he played the great machine, the thunderously silent organ, bass, tenor, soprano, low, high, and at last, at last, a chord that shuddered him so that he had to shut his eyes. About nine o'clock that night she heard him calling, "Cora!" She went upstairs.

His head peered down at her from above, smiling at her. He waved his hat.

“Good-by, Cora.”

“What do you mean?” she cried.

“I’ve thought it over for three days and I’m saying good-by.”

“Come down out of there, you fool!”

“I drew five hundred dollars from the bank yesterday. I’ve been thinking about this. And then when it happened, well . . . Cora . . .” He shoved his eager hand down. “For the last time, will you come along with me?” “In the attic? Hand down that stepladder, William Finch. I’ll climb up there and run you out of that filthy place!”

“I’m going to Hannahan’s Pier for a bowl of clam chowder,” he said. “And I’m requesting the brass band to play ‘MoonlightBay.’ Oh, come on, Cora . . .” He motioned his extended hand.

She simply stared at his gentle, questioning face.

“Good-by,” he said.

He waved gently, gently. Then his face was gone, the straw hat was gone.

“William!” she screamed. The attic was dark and silent. Shrieking, she ran and got a chair and used it to groan her way up into the musty darkness. She flourished a flashlight. “William! William!” The dark spaces were empty. A winter wind shook the house.

Then she saw the far west attic window, ajar.

She fumbled over to it. She hesitated, held her breath. Then, slowly, she opened it. The ladder was placed outside the window, leading down onto a porch roof. She pulled back from the window. Outside the opened frame the apple trees shone brightgreen, it was twilight of a summer day in July. Faintly, she heard explosions, firecrackers going off. She heard laughter and distant voices. Rockets burst in the warm air, softly, red, white, and blue, fading. She slammed the window and stood reeling. “William!” Wintry November light glowed up through the trap in the attic floor behind her. Bent to it, she saw the snow whispering against the cold clear panes down in that November world where she would spend the next thirty years.

She did not go near the window again. She sat alone in the black attic, smelling the one smell that did not seem to fade. It lingered like a sigh of satisfaction, on the air. She took a deep, long breath. The old, the familiar, the unforgettable scent of drugstore sarsaparilla.