

RAY BRADBURY

Something Wicked this Way Comes

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

The night was sweet with the dust of autumn leaves that smelled as if the fine sands of ancient Egypt were drifting to dunes beyond the town. How come, thought Will, at a time like this, I can even think of four thousand years of dust of ancient people sliding around the world, and me sad because no one notices except me and Dad here maybe, and even us not telling each other.

It was indeed a time between, one second their thoughts all brambled airedale, the next all silken slumbering cat. It was a time to go to bed, yet still they lingered reluctant as boys to give over and wander in wide circles to pillow and night thoughts. It was a time to say much but not all. It was a time after first discoveries but not last ones. It was wanting to know everything and wanting to know nothing. It was the new sweetness of men starting to talk as they must talk. It was the possible bitterness of revelation.

So while they should have gone upstairs, they could not depart this moment that promised others on not so distant nights when man and boy-becoming-man might almost sing. So Will at last said, carefully:

"Dad? Am I a good person?"

"I think so. I *know* so, yes."

"Will that help when things get really rough"

"it'll help."

"Will it save me if I heed saving? I mean, if I'm around bad people and there's no one else good around for miles, what then?"

"It'll help."

"That's not good enough, Dad!"

"Good is no guarantee for your body. It's mainly for peace of mind---"

"But sometimes, Dad, aren't you so scared that even---"

"--the mind isn't peaceful?" His father nodded, his face uneasy.

"Dad," said Will his voice very faint. "Are *you* a good person?"

"To you and your mother, yes, I try. But no man's a hero to himself. I've lived with me a lifetime, Will. I know everything worth knowing about myself---"

"And adding it all up . . . ?"

"The sum? As they come and go, and I mostly sit very still and tight, yes, I'm all right"

"Then Dad " asked Will, "Why aren't you happy?"

"The front lawn at . . . let's see . . . one-thirty in the morning . . . is no place to start a philosophical. . ."

"I just wanted to know is all."

There was a long moment of silence. Dad sighed.

Dad took his arm, walked him over and sat him down on the porch steps, relit his pipe. Puffing, he said, "All right. Your mother's asleep. She doesn't know here with our tomcat talk. We can go on. Now, look since when did you think being good meant being happy?"

"Since always."

"Since now learn otherwise. Sometimes the man who looks happiest in town, with the biggest smile, is the one carrying the biggest load of sin. There are smiles and smiles; learn to tell the dark variety from the light. The seal-barker, the laugh-shouter, half the time he's covering up. He's had his fun and he's guilty. And men *do* love sin, Will, oh how they love it, never doubt, in all shapes, sizes, colors, and smells. Times come when troughs, not tables, suit our appetites. Hear a man too loudly praising others, and look to wonder if he didn't just get up from the sty. On the other hand, that unhappy, pale, put-upon man walking by, who looks all guilt and sin, why, often that's your good man with a capital G, Will. For being good *is* a fearful occupation; men strain at it and sometimes break in two. I've known a few. You work twice as hard to be a farmer as to be his hog. I suppose it's thinking about trying to be good makes the crack run up the wall one night. A man with high standards, too, the least hair falls on him sometimes wilts his spine. He can't let himself alone, won't lift himself of the hook if he falls just a breath from grace.

"Oh, it would be lovely if you could just *be* fine, *act* fine, not think of it all the time. But it's hard, right? with the last piece of lemon cake waiting in the icebox, middle of the night, not yours, but you lie awake in a hot sweat for it, eh? do I need tell you? Or, a hot spring day, noon, and there you are chained to your school desk and away off there goes the river, cool and fresh over the rock-fall. Boys can hear clear water like that miles away. So, minute by minute, hour by hour, a lifetime, it never ends, never stops, you got the choice this second, now this next, and the next after that, be good, be bad, that's what the clock ticks, that's what it says in the ticks. Run swim, or stay hot, run eat or lie hungry. So you stay, but once stayed, Will, you know the secret, don't you? don't think of the river again. Or the cake. Because if you do, you'll go crazy. Add up all the rivers never swum in, cakes never eaten, and by the time you get my age, Will, it's a lot missed out on. But then you console yourself, thinking, the more times in, the more times possibly drowned, or choked on lemon frosting. But then, through plain dumb cowardice, I guess, maybe you hold off from too much, wait, play it safe.

"Look at me: married at thirty-nine, Will, thirty-nine! But I was so busy wrestling myself two falls out of three, I figured I couldn't marry until I had licked myself good and forever. Too late, I found you can't wait to become perfect, you got to go out and fall down and get up with everybody else. So at last I looked up from my great self-wrestling match one night when your mother came to the library for a book, and got me, instead. And I saw then and there you take a man half-bad and a woman half-bad and put their two good halves together and you got one human all good to share between. That's you, Will, for my money. And the strange thing is, son, and sad, too, though you're always racing out there on the rim of the lawn, and me on the roof using barks for shingles, comparing life to libraries, I soon saw you were wiser, sooner and better, than I will ever

be. . . ."

Dad's pipe was dead. He paused to tap it out and reload it.

"No sir," Will said.

"Yes," said his father, "I'd be a fool not to know I'm a fool. My one wisdom is: you're wise."

"Funny " Will said after a long pause. 'You've told me more, tonight, than I've told you. I'll think some more. Maybe I'll tell you everything at breakfast. Okay?"

"I'll be ready if you are---"

"Because . . . I want you to be happy, Dad--"

He hated the tears that sprang to his eyes.

"I'll be all right Will"

"Anything I could say or do to make you happy, I would."

*Willy, William." Dad lit his pipe again and watched the smoke blow away in sweet dissolvings. "Just tell me I'll live forever. That would do nicely."

His voice, Will thought, I never noticed. It's the same color as his hair.

"Pa " he said, "don't sound so sad."

"Me? I'm the original sad man. I read a book and it makes me sad. See a film: sad. Plays? they really work me over."

"is there anything," said Will "doesn't make you sad?"

"One thing. Death."

"Boy!" Will started. "I should think *that* would!"

"No," said the man with the voice to match his hair.

"Death makes everything else sad. But death itself only scares. If there wasn't death, all the other things wouldn't get tainted."

And, Will thought, here comes the carnival, Death like a rattle in one hand, Life like candy in the other; shake one to scare you, offer one to make your mouth water. Here comes the sideshow, both hands *full!*

He jumped to his feet.

"Dad, oh, listen! You'll live forever! Believe me, or you're sunk! Sure, you were sick a few years ago--but that's over. Sure, you're fifty-four, but that's young! And another thing--"

"Yes Willy?"

His father waited for him. He swayed. He bit his lips, then blurted out:

"Don't go near the carnival."

"Strange," his father said, "that's what I was going to tell you."

"I wouldn't go back to that place for a billion dollars!"

But, Will thought, that won't stop the carnival searching through town to visit *me*.

"Promise, Dad?"

"Why don't you want me to go there, Will?"

"That's one of the things I'll tell tomorrow or next week or next year. You just got to trust me, Dad."

"I do son." Dad took his hand. "It's a promise."

As if at a signal, both turned to the house. The time was up, the hour was late, enough had been said, they properly sensed they must go.

"The way you came out," said Dad "is the way you go in."
Will walked silently to touch the iron rungs hidden under the rustling ivy.

"Dad. You won't pull these *off* . . . ?"

Dad probed one with his fingers.

"Some day, when you're tired of them, you'll take them off yourself ."

"I'll never be tired of them."

"Is that how it seems? Yes, to someone your age, you figure you'll never get tired of anything. All right, son, up you go."

He saw how his father looked up along the ivy and the hidden path.

"You want to come up this way, too?"

"No, no," his father said, quickly.

"Because " said Will, "You're welcome--"

"That's all right. Go on."

But still he looked at the ivy stirring in the dark morning light. Will sprang up, grabbed the first, the second, the third rungs and looked down.

From just this distance, Dad looked as if he were shrinking, there on the ground. Somehow he didn't want to leave him behind, there in the night, like someone ditched by someone else, one hand up to move, but not moving.

"Dad!" he whispered. "You ain't got the *stuff*"

Who says!/? cried Dad's mouth, silently.

And he Jumped.

And laughing without sound, the boy, the man swung up the side of the house, unceasingly, hand over hand. foot after foot.

He heard Dad slip, scabble, grab.

Hold tight! he thought.

The man breathed hard.

Eyes tight, Will prayed: hold . . . *there* . . now . . !!

The old man gusted out, sucked in, swore in a fierce whisper, then climbed again.

Will opened his eyes and climbed and the rest was smooth high, higher, Me, sweet, wondrous, done! They swung in and sat upon the sill, same size, same weight, colored same by the stars, and sat embraced once more with grand fine exhaustion, gasping on huge sniped laughs which swept their bones together, and for fear of waking God, country, wife, Mom, and hell, they snug-clapped hands to each other's mouths, felt the vibrant warm hilarity fountained there, and sat one instant longer, eyes bright with each other and wet with love.

Then, with a last strong clasp, Dad was gone, the bedroom door shut.

Drunk on the long night's doings, lolled away from fear toward better, grander things found in Dad, Will slung off limp-falling clothes with tipsy arms and delightfully aching legs, and like a fall of timber chopped himself to bed. . . .

