

FROST AND FIRE and Stories that Connect

I have this coworker, we'll call her Sydney, who is, as a general rule, not the most pleasant towards me. It's entirely possible that I did or said something at some point that offended her, but I truly don't know what that might have been. I make an effort to be friendly, or at least polite with her. I greet her once by name when I see her at the start of a shift, "Good afternoon, Sydney," and she typically ignores me as if nothing was said and as if I do not exist.

She surprised me one day, a Wednesday afternoon in August, and sent me on a small roller coaster of emotions over the course of roughly ten seconds. She responded to my greeting with a big smile on her face that I read as excitement to tell me something.

I was momentarily thrilled with the change and eager to hear what she had to say. She was delighted because she caught a mistake I made the night before. It turned out that I knew what mistake she was referring to and it was done by someone else. (That is not meant to imply that I never make mistakes, just not that one in particular.) When I explained what actually happened, Sydney scowled at me and walked away, no longer interested in acknowledging my existence.

I was upset. Her obvious joy at the prospect of gloating over my mistake and her utter dismissal of me when that didn't land... it bothered me deeply.

I knew it shouldn't, and I tried to tell myself it didn't matter. I should let it go, but I just couldn't. It was all I could think about.

I took a few minutes to store some items in the back then walked out to the guest-facing area where Sydney was now talking with our coworker Jon about a television show she enjoys. He said, "I haven't seen it, but I DID read Frost and Fire last night." He turned to face me mid-sentence with the most excited grin on his face.

Some context: Jon is one of my absolute favorite coworkers. In the two years I've worked at this hotel, he and I have had fantastic discussions about a wide array of topics: philosophy, cyber-security, viking-themed battle music, exercise routines (His. Not mine. He is in VASTLY better shape than I am.), religion, camping, books, trading cards, you name it.

Frequently, he will start a conversation with a big question, apropos of nothing at all. "What is the meaning of life?" I answered Food since not only does every living thing need regular food of some

kind, but our social interactions are so often built on gathering to share food together.

Another time, he asked what I thought was the meaning of the universe. I had to think about that one, but my answer was Art, the expression of beauty, because beautiful things can come even out of destruction.

Jon is someone who makes me feel energized every time we talk, excited to come back to work and hear what's new on his mind since the last time we spoke.

On this particular Wednesday in August, Jon was sharing his enthusiasm after he read a short story I'd previously recommended to him. FROST AND FIRE was written by Ray Bradbury and published in PLANET STORIES Magazine in 1946, originally under the name "THE CREATURES THAT TIME FORGOT." It describes a world in which humans live an entire lifespan in only eight days, and the incredible journey of one human called Sim who learns his people's history through shared racial memory and then embarks on a desperate struggle to somehow gain more days, more time to live his short, doomed life.

Jon told me he'd read FROST AND FIRE in a single sitting because he'd been so enthralled he had to finish it. Moments from the story kept popping into his mind throughout the day.

We talked about the story's incredible pacing, how the time running out made each moment, each decision absolutely critical. We discussed the profound dramatic tension when Sim finally does experience a "normal" rate of aging for the first time and he can feel his body slowing down. And we commended the idea of racial memory as a means for the character to process and express his relationship with his world in a compressed timeframe.

Talking to Jon about this short story, I felt suddenly... wonderful, delighted and ready to have a great day at work. It wasn't that I'd forgotten the interaction with Sydney, but it had no sting anymore and it felt very far away, even though less than half an hour had passed.

I'd only read FROST AND FIRE about two months before that Wednesday August afternoon, and only even heard of it a few months before that.

One of my favorite authors is Brandon Sanderson, writer of the STORMLIGHT ARCHIVE, THE MISTBORN SAGA, ELANTRIS and TRESS OF THE EMERALD SEA (to name only a few). His worlds

have intricate systems of magic where the logic is worked out to an incredibly specific, detailed and consistent degree. One of the highlights of my week is Wednesday morning, when I get to listen to a new episode of his INTENTIONALLY BLANK podcast, in which he talks to one of his friends, often a fellow writer, but not always, while he signs copies of books for his fans.

I've heard literally hundreds of hours of this man speaking. I know about the books that inspired him, his favorite restaurants and action films, his travel adventures and vast trading card collection, and his strategy of playing punishingly hard videogames that I don't think that I would even remotely enjoy.

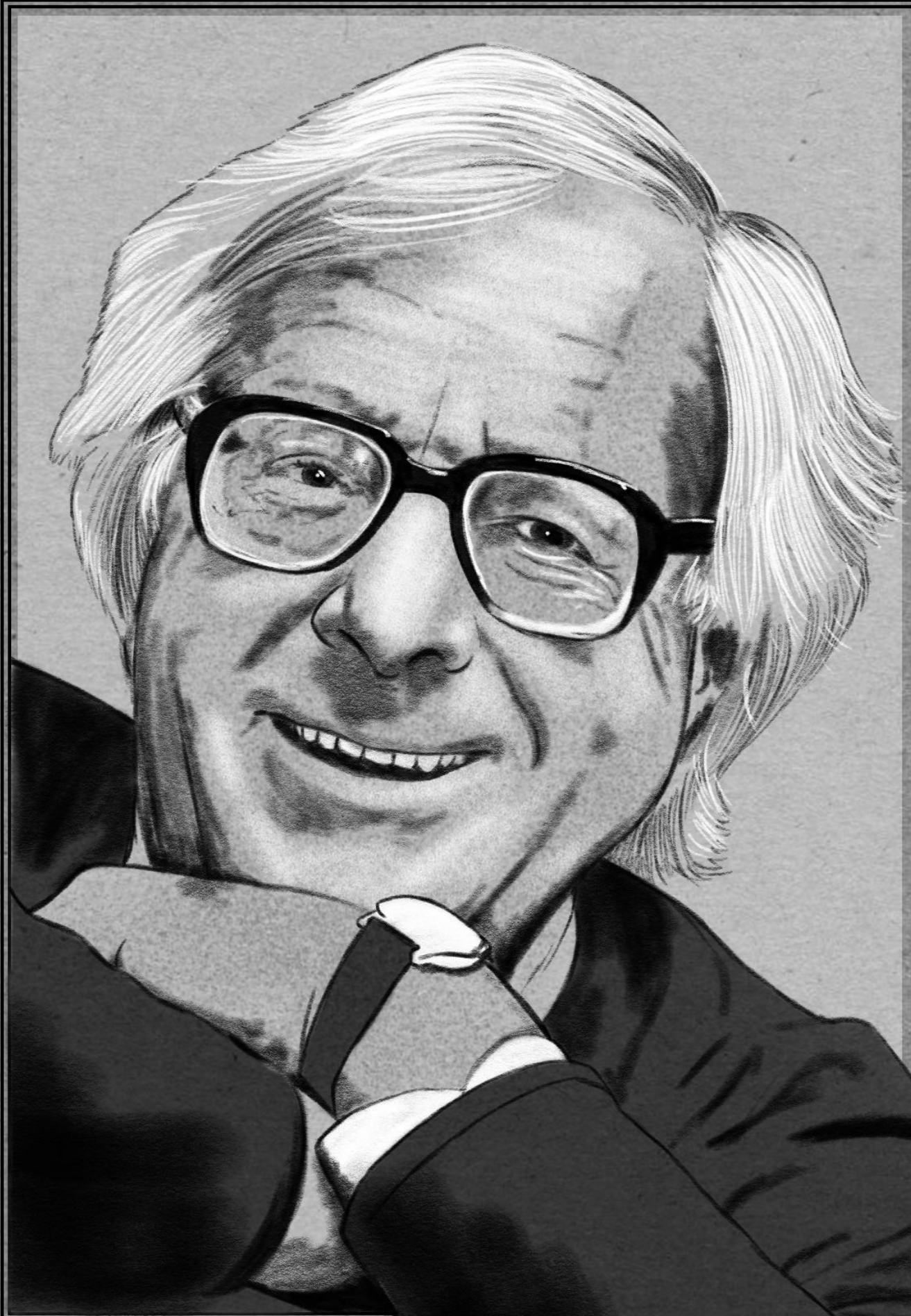
I have never met Brandon Sanderson, and considering how fast tickets to his conventions regularly sell out, it's not terribly likely that I will ever get to meet him. But, through this podcast, I have been able to enjoy some small degree of connection to him, and that has meant a lot to me.

In an episode of INTENTIONALLY BLANK released at the beginning of 2024, Sanderson, along with Mary Robinette Kowal, shared a list of favorite science fiction stories, with FROST AND FIRE among them. He conveyed how that story had inspired one of his more recent Cosmere novels, THE SUNLIT MAN. I've so far read only four out of the ten stories recommended in that episode, so I certainly have some work ahead of me, but I have absolutely loved getting to experience these works of thoughtful and foundational fiction that I might not have even known about otherwise.

The conversation with Jon on that Wednesday August afternoon got me thinking about the way that stories can connect people. FROST AND FIRE, this story that was written eighty years ago, helped me better understand the influence of one of my favorite authors and the inspiration for a modern novel that I immensely enjoyed reading. Then, it gave me the topic for a wonderful conversation with a dear friend that helped make a bad day tremendously better.

I think that anything that does all that is doing something pretty great.

-Daniel Aartman
August 14, 2024



RAY BRADBURY