

Death and the Maiden, Ray Bradbury

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Far out in the country beyond the woods, beyond the world, really, lived Old Mam, and she had lived there for ninety years with the door locked tight, not opening for anyone, be it wind, rain, sparrow tapping or little boy with a pailful of crayfish rapping. If you scratched at her shutters, she called through:

“Go away, Death!”

“I’m not Death!” you might say.

But she’d cry back, “Death, I know you, you come today in the shape of a girl. But I see the bones behind the freckles!”

Or someone else might knock.

“I see you, Death!” would cry Old Mam. “In the shape of a scissors-grinder! But the door is triple-locked and double-barred. I got flypaper on the cracks, tape on the keyholes, dust mops up the chimney, cobwebs in the shutters, and the electricity cut off so you can’t slide in with the juice! No telephones so you can call me to my doom at three in the dark morning.

And I got my ears stuffed with cotton so I can’t hear your reply to what I say now. So, Death, get away!”

That’s how it had been through the town’s history. People in that world beyond the wood spoke of her and sometimes boys doubting the tale would heave chunks against the roof slates just to hear Old Mam wail, “Go on, good-bye, you in black with the white, white face!”

And the tale was that Old Mam, with such tactics, would live forever. After all, Death couldn’t get in, could he? All the old germs in her house must have long since given up and gone to sleep.

All the new germs running through the land with new names every week or ten days, if you believed the papers, couldn't get in past the bouquets of rock moss, rue, black tobacco and castor bean at every door.

"She'll bury us all," said the town 'way off where the train ran by.

"I'll bury them all," said Old Mam, alone and playing solitaire with Braille-marked cards, in the dark.

And that's how it was.

Years passed without another visitor, be it boy, girl, tramp or traveling man, knocking at her door. Twice a year a grocery clerk from the world beyond, seventy himself, left packages that might have been birdseed, could have been milk-bone biscuit, but were almost certainly stamped into bright steel cans with yellow lions and red devils inked on the bright wrappers, and trod off over the choppy sea of lumber on the front porch. The food might stay there for a week, baked by the sun, frozen by the moon; a proper time of antiseptis. Then, one morning, it was gone.

Old Mam's career was waiting. She did it well, with her eyes closed and her hands clasped and the hairs inside her ears trembling, listening, always ready.

So she was not surprised when, on the seventh day of August in her ninety-first year, a young man with a sunburned face walked through the wood and stood before her house.

He wore a suit like that snow which slides whispering in white linen off a winter roof to lay itself in folds on the sleeping earth. He had no car; he had walked a long way, but looked fresh and clean.

He carried no cane to lean on and wore no hat to keep off the stunning blows of the sun. He did not perspire. Most important of all, he carried only one thing with him, an eight-ounce bottle with a bright-green liquid inside. Gazing deeply into this green color, he sensed he was in front of Old Mam's house, and looked up.

He didn't touch her door. He walked slowly around her house and let her feel him making the circle.

Then, with his X-ray eyes, he let her feel his steady gaze.

"Oh!" cried Old Mam, waking with a crumb of graham cracker still in her mouth. "It's you! I know who you came as this time!"

"Who?"

"A young man with a face like a pink summer melon. But you got no shadow! Why's that? Why?"

"People are afraid of shadows. So I left mine back beyond the wood."

"So I see, without looking."

"Oh," said the young man with admiration. "You have Powers."

"Great Powers, to keep you out and me in!"

The young man's lips barely moved. "I won't even bother to wrestle you."

But she heard. "You'd lose, you'd lose!"

"And I like to win. So—I'll just leave this bottle on your front stoop."

He heard her heart beating fast through the walls of the house.

"Wait! What's in it? Anything left on my property, I got a right to know!"

"Well," said the young man.

"Go on!"

"In this bottle," he said, "is the first night and the first day you turned eighteen."

"What, what, what!"

"You heard me."

"The night I turned eighteen . . . the day?"

"That's it."

"In a bottle?"

He held it high and it was curved and shaped not unlike a young woman. It took the light of the world and flashed back warmth and green fire like the coals burning in a tiger's eyes. It looked now serene, now suddenly shifted and turbulent in his hands.

"I don't believe it!" cried Old Mam.

"I'll leave it and go," said the young man. "When I'm gone, try a teaspoon of the green thoughts in this bottle. Then you'll know."

"It's poison!"

"No."

"You promise, mother's honor?"

"I have no mother."

"What do you swear on?"

"Myself."

"It'll kill me, that's what you want!"

"It will raise you from the dead."

"I'm not dead!"

The young man smiled at the house.

"Aren't you?" he said.

"Wait! Let me ask myself: Are you dead? Are you? Or nearly, all these years?"

"The day and the night you turned eighteen," said the young man.

"Think it over."

"It's so long ago!"

Something stirred like a mouse by a coffin-sized window.

"This will bring it back."

He let the sun wash through the elixir that glowed like the crushed sap of a thousand green blades of summer grass. It looked hot and still as a green sun, it looked wild and blowing as the sea.

"This was a good day in a good year of your life."

"A good year," she murmured, hidden away.

“A vintage year. Then there was savor to your life. One swig and you’d know the taste! Why not try it, eh? Eh?”

He held the bottle higher and farther out and it was suddenly a telescope which, peered through from either end, brought to focus a time in a year long gone. A green-and-yellow time much like this noon in which the young man offered up the past like a burning glass between his serene fingers.

He tilted the bright flask, and a butterfly of white-hot illumination winged up and down the window shutters, playing them like gray piano keys, soundlessly.

With hypnotic ease the burning wings frittered through the shutter slots to catch a lip, a nose, an eye, poised there. The eye snatched itself away, then, curious, relit itself from the beam of light.

Now, having caught what he wanted to catch, the young man held the butterfly reflection steady, save for the breathing of its fiery wings, so that the green fire of that far-distant day poured through the shutters of not only ancient house but ancient woman. He heard her breathe out her muffled startlement, her repressed delight.

“No, no, you can’t fool me!” She sounded like someone deep under water, trying not to drown in a lazy tide. “Coming back dressed in that flesh, you! Putting on that mask I can’t quite see! Talking with that voice I remember from some other year. Whose voice? I don’t care! My ouija board here on my lap spells who you really are and what you sell!”

“I sell just this twenty-four hours from young life.”

“You sell something else!”

“No, I can’t sell what I am.”

“If I come out you’d grab and shove me six feet under. I’ve had you fooled, put off, for years. Now you whine back with new plans, none of which will work!”

“If you came out the door, I’d only kiss your hand, young lady.”

“Don’t call me what I’m not!”

“I call you what you could be an hour from now.”

“An hour from now . . .” she whispered, to herself.

“How long since you been walked through this wood?”

“Some other war, or some peace,” she said. “I can’t see. The water’s muddy.”

“Young lady,” he said, “it’s a fine summer day. There’s a tapestry of golden bees, now this design, now that, in the green church aisle of trees here. There’s honey in a hollow oak flowing like a river of fire.

Kick off your shoes, you can crush wild mint, wading deep. Wildflowers like clouds of yellow butterflies lie in the valley. The air under these trees is like deep well water cool and clear you drink with your nose. A summer day, young as young ever was.”

“But I’m old, old as ever was.”

“Not if you listen! Here’s my out-and-out bargain, deal, sale—a transaction betwixt you, me and the August weather.”

“What kind of deal, what do I get for my investment?”

“Twenty-four long sweet summer hours, starting now. When we’ve run through these woods and picked the berries and eaten the honey, we’ll go on to town and buy you the finest spider-web-thin white summer dress and lift you on the train.”

“The train!”

“The train to the city, an hour away, where we’ll have dinner and dance all night. I’ll buy you four shoes, you’ll need them, wearing out one pair.”

“My bones—I can’t move.”

“You’ll run rather than walk, dance rather than run. We’ll watch the stars wheel over the sky and bring the sun up, flaming. We’ll string footprints along the lake shore at dawn. We’ll eat the biggest breakfast in mankind’s history and lie on the sand like two chicken pies warming at noon.

Then, late in the day, a five-pound box of bonbons on our laps, we’ll laugh back on the train, covered with the conductor’s ticket-punch confetti, blue, green, orange, like we were married, and walk through town seeing nobody, no one, and wander back through the sweet dusk-smelling wood into your house . . .”

Silence.

“It’s already over,” murmured her voice. “And it hasn’t begun.”

Then: “Why are you doing this? What’s in it for you?!”

The young man smiled tenderly. “Why, girl, I want to sleep with you.”

She gasped. “I never slept with no one in my life!”

“You’re a . . . maiden lady?”

“And proud of it!”

The young man sighed, shaking his head. “So it’s true—you are, you really are, a maiden.”

He heard nothing from the house, so listened.

Softly, as if a secret faucet had been turned somewhere with difficulty, and drop by drop an ancient system were being used for the first time in half a century, the old woman began to cry.

“Old Mam, why do you cry?”

“I don’t know,” she wailed.

Her weeping faded at last and he heard her rock in her chair, making a cradle rhythm to soothe herself.

“Old Mam,” he whispered.

“Don’t call me that!”

“All right,” he said. “Clarinda.”

“How did you know my name? No one knows!”

“Clarinda, why did you hide in that house, long ago?”

“I don’t remember. Yes, I do. I was afraid.”

“Afraid?”

“Strange. Half my years afraid of life. The other half, afraid of death. Always some kind of afraid. You! Tell the truth, now! When my twenty-four hours are up, after we walk by the lake and take the train back and come through the woods to my house, you want to . . .”

He made her say it.

“. . . sleep with me?” she whispered.

“For ten thousand million years,” he said.

“Oh.” Her voice was muted. “That’s a long time.”

He nodded.

“A long time,” she repeated. “What kind of bargain is that, young man? You give me twenty-four hours of being eighteen again and I give you ten thousand million years of my precious time.”

“Don’t forget, my time, too,” he said. “I’ll never go away.”

“You’ll lie with me?”

“I will.”

“Oh, young man, young man. Your voice. So familiar.”

“Look.”

He saw the keyhole unplugged and her eye peer out at him. He smiled at the sunflowers in the field and the sunflower in the sky.

“I’m blind, half blind,” she cried. “But can that be Willy Winchester ’way out there?”

He said nothing.

“But, Willy, you’re just twenty-one by the look of you, not a day different than you were seventy years back!”

He set the bottle by the front door and walked back out to stand in the weeds.

“Can—” She faltered. “Can you make me look like yourself?”

He nodded.

“Oh, Willy, Willy, is that really you?”

She waited, staring across the summer air to where he stood relaxed and happy and young, the sun flashing off his hair and cheeks.

A minute passed.

“Well?” he said.

“Wait!” she cried. “Let me think!”

And there in the house he could feel her letting her memories pour through her mind as sand pours through an hourglass, heaping itself at last into nothing but dust and ashes. He could hear the emptiness of those memories burning the sides of her mind as they fell down and down and made a higher and yet higher mound of sand.

All that desert, he thought, and not one oasis.

She trembled at his thought.

“Well,” he said again.

And at last she answered.

“Strange,” she murmured. “Now, all of a sudden, twenty-four hours, one day, traded for ten million billion years, sounds fair and good and right.”

“It is, Clarinda,” he said. “Oh, yes, it is.”

The bolts slid back, the locks rattled, the door cracked. Her hand jerked out, seized the bottle and flicked back in.

A minute passed.

Then, as if a gun had been fired off, footsteps pelted through the halls. The back door slammed open. Upstairs, windows flew wide, as shutters fell crumbling to the grass. Downstairs, a moment later, the same.

Shutters exploded to kindling as she thrust them out. The windows exhaled dust.

Then at last, from the front door, flung wide, the empty bottle sailed and smashed against a rock.

She was on the porch, quick as a bird. The sunlight struck full upon her. She stood as someone on a stage, in a single revealing motion, come from the dark. Then, down the steps, she threw her hand to catch his.

A small boy passing on the road below stopped, stared and, walking backward, moved out of sight, his eyes still wide.

“Why did he stare at me?” she said. “Am I beautiful?”

“Very beautiful.”

“I need a mirror!”

“No, no, you don’t.”

“Will everyone in town see me beautiful? It’s not just me thinking so, is it, or you pretending?”

“Beauty is what you are.”

“Then I’m beautiful, for that’s how I feel. Will everyone dance me tonight, will men fight for turns?”

“They will, one and all.”

Down the path, in the sound of bees and stirring leaves, she stopped suddenly and looked into his face so like the summer sun.

“Oh, Willy, Willy, when it’s all over and we come back here, will you be kind to me?”

He gazed deep into her eyes and touched her cheek with his fingers.

“Yes,” he said gently. “I will be kind.”

“I believe you,” she said. “Oh, Willy, I believe.”

And they ran down the path out of sight, leaving dust on the air and leaving the front door of the house wide and the shutters open and the windows up so the light of the sun could flash in with the birds come to build nests, raise families, and so petals of lovely summer flowers could blow like bridal showers through the long halls in a carpet and into the rooms and over the empty-but-waiting bed.

And summer, with the breeze, changed the air in all the great spaces of the house so it smelled like the Beginning or the first hour after the Beginning, when the world was new and nothing would ever change and no one would ever grow old.

Somewhere rabbits ran thumping like quick hearts in the forest.

Far off, a train hooted, rushing faster, faster, faster, toward the town.

The End