

Fee Fie Foe Fum, Ray Bradbury

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The postman came melting along the sidewalk in the hot summer sun, his nose dripping, his fingers wet on his full leather pouch. "Let's see. Next house is Barton's. Three letters. One for Thomas Q., one for his wife, Liddy, and one for old Grandma. Is she still alive? How do they hang on."

He slid the letters in the box and froze.
A lion roared.
He stepped back, eyes wide.

The screen door sang open on its taut spring. "Morning, Ralph."
"Morning, Mrs. Barton. Just heard your pet lion."
"What?"
"Lion. In your kitchen."

She listened. "Oh, that? Our Garburator. You know: garbage disposal unit."
"Your husband buy it?"

"Right. You men and your machines. That thing'll eat anything, bones and all."
"Careful. It might eat you."

"No. I'm a lion-tamer." She laughed, and listened. "Hey, it does sound like a lion."
"A hungry one. Well, so long."

He drifted off into the hot morning.
Liddy ran upstairs with the letters.
"Grandma?" She tapped on a door. "Letter for you."
The door was silent.

"Grandma? You in there?"

After a long pause, a dry-wicker voice replied, "Yep."

"What're you doing?"

"Ask me no questions, I'll tell you no lies," chanted the old one, hid away.

"You've been in there all morning."

"I might be here all year," snapped Grandma.

Liddy tried the knob. "You've locked the door."

"Well, so I have!"

"You coming down to lunch, Grandma?"

"Nope. Nor supper. I won't come down till you throw that damned machine out of the kitchen." Her flinty eye jittered in the keyhole, staring out at her granddaughter.

"You mean the Garburator?" Liddy smiled.

"I heard the postman. He's right. I won't have a lion in my house! Listen! There's your husband now, using it."

Below stairs, the Garburator roared, swallowing garbage, bones and all.

"Liddy!" her husband called. "Liddy, come on down. See it work!"

Liddy spoke to Grandma's keyhole. "Don't you want to watch, Grandma?"

"Nope!"

Footsteps arose behind Liddy. Turning, she found Tom on the top stairs.

"Go down and try, Liddy. I got some extra bones from the butcher. It really chews them."

She descended toward the kitchen. "It's grisly, but heck, why not?"

Thomas Barton stood neat and alone at Grandma's door and waited a full minute, motionless, a prim smile on his lips. He knocked softly, delicately. "Grandma?" he whispered. No reply. He patted the knob tenderly. "I know you're there, you old ruin. Grandma, you hear? Down below. You hear? How come your door's locked? Something wrong? What could bother you on such a nice summer day?"

Silence. He moved into the bathroom.

The hall stood empty. From the bath came sounds of water running. Then, Thomas Barton's voice, full and resonant in the tile room, sang:

"Fee fie foe fum

I smell the blood of an Englishmum;

Be she alive or be she dead,

I'll gurr-r-innnnnnd her bones to make my bread!"

In the kitchen, the lion roared.

Grandma smelled like attic furniture, smelled like dust, smelled like a lemon, and resembled a withered flower. Her firm jaw sagged and her pale gold eyes were flinty bright as she sat in her chair like a hatchet, cleaving the hot noon air, rocking.

She heard Thomas Barton's song.
Her heart grew an ice crystal.

She had heard her grandson-in-law rip open the crate this morning, like a child with an evil Christmas toy. The fierce cracklings and tearings, the cry of triumph, the eager fumbling of his hands over the toothy machine. He had caught Grandma's yellow eagle eye in the hall entry and given her a mighty wink. Bang! She had run to slam her door!

Grandma shivered in her room all day.
Liddy knocked again, concerning lunch, but was scolded away.

Through the simmering afternoon, the Garburator lived gloriously in the kitchen sink. It fed, it ate, it made grinding, smacking noises with hungry mouth and vicious hidden teeth. It whirled, it groaned.

It ate pig knuckles, coffee grounds, eggshells, drumsticks. It was an ancient hunger which, unfed, waited, crouched, metal entrail upon metal entrail, little flailing propellers of razor-screw all bright with lust.

Liddy carried supper up on a tray.

"Slide it under the door," shouted Grandma.

"Heavens!" said Liddy. "Open the door long enough for me to poke it in at you."

"Look over your shoulder; anyone lurking in the hall?"

"No."

"So!" The door flew wide. Half the corn was spilled being yanked in. She gave Liddy a shove and slammed the door. "That was close!" she cried, holding the rabbit-run in her bosom.

"Grandma, what's got in you?"

Grandma watched the knob twist. "No use telling, you wouldn't believe, child. Out of the goodness of my heart I moved you here a year ago. Tom and I always spit at each other. Now he wants me gone, but he won't get me, no sir! I know his trick. One day you'll come from the store and I'll be nowhere.

You'll ask Tom: What happened to old Grandma? Sweet-smiling, he'll say: Grandma? Just now decided to hike to Illinois! Just packed and left! And you won't see Grandma again, Liddy, you know why, you got an inkling?"

"Grandma, that's gibberish. Tom loves you!"

"Loves my house, my antiques, my mattress-money, that's what he loves dearly! Get away, I'll work this out myself! I'm locked in here till hell burns out."

"What about your canary, Grandma?"

"You feed Singing Sam! Buy hamburger for Spottie, he's a happy dog, I can't let him starve. Bring Kitten up on occasion, I can't live without cats. Now, shoo! I'm climbing in bed."

Grandma put herself to bed like a corpse preparing its own coffin. She folded her yellow wax fingers on her ruffly bosom, as her mothlike eyelids winced shut. What to do? What weapon to use against that clockwork mechanic? Liddy? But Liddy was fresh as new-baked bread, her rosy face was excited only by cinnamon buns and raised muffins, she smelled of yeast and warm milk.

The only murder Liddy might consider was one where the victim ended on the dinner platter, orange sucked in mouth, cloves in pink hide, silent under the knife. No, you couldn't tell wild truths to Liddy, she'd only laugh and bake another cake.

Grandma sighed a lost sigh.

The small vein in her chicken neck stopped throbbing. Only the fragile bellows of her tiny lungs moved in the room like the ghost of an apprehension, whispering.

Below, in its bright chromed cage, the lion slept.

A week passed.

Only "heading for the bathroom" ran Grandma out of hiding. When Thomas Barton throttled his car she panicked from her bedroom. Her bathroom visits were frantic and explosive. She fell back in bed a few minutes later. Some mornings, Thomas delayed going to his office, purposely, and stood, erect as a numeral one, mathematically clean, working on her door with his eyes, smiling at this delay.

Once in the middle of a summer night, she sneaked down and fed the "lion" a bag of nuts and bolts. She trusted Liddy to turn on the beast at dawn and choke it to death. She lay in bed early, hearing the first stirs and yawns of the two arising people, waiting for the sound of the lion shrieking, choked by bolt, washer, and screw, dying of indigestible parts.

She heard Thomas walk downstairs.

Half an hour later his voice said, "Here's a present for you, Grandma. My lion says: No thanks."

Peeking out, later, she found the nuts and bolts laid in a neat row on her sill.

On the morning of the twelfth day of imprisonment, Grandma dialed her bedroom phone:

"Hello, Tom, that you? You at work, Tom?"

"This is my office number, why?"

"True." She hung up and tiptoed down the hall stairs into the parlor.

Liddy looked up, shocked. "Grandma!"

"Who else?" snapped the old one. "Tom here?"

"You know he's working."

"Yes, yes!" Grandma stared unblinkingly about, gumming her porcelain teeth. "Just phoned him. Take ten minutes for him to drive home, don't it?"

"Sometimes half an hour."

"Good." Grandma mourned. "Can't stay in my room. Just had to come down, see you, set awhile, breathe." She pulled a tiny gold watch from her bosom. "In ten minutes, back up I go. I'll phone Tom then, to see if he's still at work."

"I might come down again, if he is." She opened the front door and called out into the fresh summer day. "Spottie, here, Spot! Kitten, here, Kitt!"

A large white dog, unmarked, appeared, yelping, to be let in, followed by a plump black cat which leaped in her lap when she sat.

"Good pals," Grandma cooed, stroking them. She lay back, eyes shut, and listened for the song of her wonderful canary in his golden cage in the dining room bay window.

Silence.

Grandma rose and peeked through the dining room door.

It was an instant before she realized what had happened to the cage. It was empty.

"Singing Sam's gone!" screamed Grandma. She ran to dump the cage upside down. "Gone!"

The cage fell to the floor, just as Liddy appeared. "I thought it was quiet, but didn't know why. I must've left the cage open by mistake—" "Yousure? Oh my God,wait!"

Grandma closed her eyes and groped her way out to the kitchen.

Finding the kitchen sink cool under her fingers, she opened her eyes and looked down.

The Garburator lay gleaming, silent, its mouth wide. At its rim lay a small yellow feather.

Grandma turned on the water.

The Garburator made a chewing, swallowing noise.

Slowly, Grandma clamped both skinny hands over her mouth.

Her room was quiet as a pool; she remained in it like a quiet forest thing, knowing that once out of its shade, she might be set on by a jungle terror. With Singing Sam's disappearance, the horror had made a mushroom growth into hysteria. Liddy had had to fight her away from the sink, where Grandma was trying to bat the gluttonous machine with a hammer. Liddy had forced her upstairs to put ice compresses on her raging brow.

"Singing Sam, he's killed poor Sam!" Grandma had sobbed and wailed. But then the thrashing ceased, firm resolve seeped back. She locked Liddy out again and now there was a cold rage in her, in company with the fear and trembling; to think Tom would dare do this to her!

Now she would not open the door far enough to allow even supper in on a tray. She had dinner rattled to a chair outside, and she ate through the door-crack, held open on a safety chain just far enough so you saw her skeleton hand dart out like a bird shadowing the meat and corn, flying off with morsels, flying back for more. "Thanks!" And the swift bird vanished behind the shut door.

"Singing Sam must've flown off, Grandma." Liddy phoned from the drugstore to Grandma's room, because Grandma refused to talk any other way.

"Goodnight!" cried Grandma, and disconnected.

The next day Grandma phoned Thomas again.

"You there, Tom?"

"Where else?" said Tom.

Grandma ran downstairs.

"Here, Spot, Spottie! Here, Kitten!"

The dog and cat did not answer.

She waited, gripping the door, and then she called for Liddy.

Liddy came.

"Liddy," said Grandma, in a stiff voice, barely audible, not looking at her. "Go look in the Garburator. Lift up the metal piece. Tell me what you see."

Grandma heard Liddy's footsteps far away. A silence.

"What do you see?" cried Grandma, impatient and afraid.

Liddy hesitated. "A piece of white fur—"

"Yes?"

"And—a piece of black fur."

"Stop. No more. Get me an aspirin."

Liddy obeyed. "You and Tom must stop, Grandma. This silly game, I mean. I'll chew him out tonight. It's not funny anymore. I thought if I let you alone, you'd stop raving about some lion. But now it's been a week—"

Grandma said, "Do you really think we'll ever see Spot or Kitten again?"

"They'll be home for supper, hungry as ever," Liddy replied. "It was crude of Tom to stuff that fur in the Garburator. I'll stop it."

"Will you, Liddy?" Grandma walked upstairs as in a trance. "Will you, really?"

Grandma lay planning through the night. This all must end. The dog and cat had not returned for supper, though Liddy laughed and said they would. Grandma nodded. She and Tom must tie a final knot now.

Destroy the machine? But he'd install another, and, between them, put her into an asylum if she didn't stop babbling. No, a crisis must be forced, on her own grounds, in her own time and way. How? Liddy must be tricked from the house.

Then Grandma must meet Thomas, at long last, alone. She was dead tired of his smiles, worn away by this quick eating and hiding, this lizard-darting in and out doors. No. She sniffed the cooling wind at midnight.

"Tomorrow," she decided, "will be a grand day for a picnic."

"Grandma!"

Liddy's voice through the keyhole. "We're leaving now. Sure you won't come along?"

"No, child! Enjoy yourselves. It's a fine morning!"

Bright Saturday. Grandma, early, had telephoned downstairs suggesting her two relatives take ham and pickle sandwiches out through the green forests. Tom had assented swiftly. Of course! A picnic! Tom had laughed and rubbed his hands.

"Good-bye, Grandma!"

The rustle of picnic wickers, the slamming door, the car purring off into the excellent weather.

"There." Grandma appeared in the living room. "Now it's just a matter of time. He'll sneak back. I could tell by his voice; too happy! He'll creep in, all alone, to visit."

She swept the house with a brisk straw broom. She felt she was sweeping out all the numerical bits and pieces of Thomas Barton, cleaning him away. All the tobacco fragments and neat newspapers he had flourished with his morning Brazilian coffee, clean threads from his scrupulous tweed suit, clips from his office supplies, out the door!

It was like setting a stage. She ran about raising green shades to allow the summer in, flooding the rooms with bright color. The house was terribly lonely without a dog making noise like a typewriter on the kitchen floor or a cat blowing through it like silk tumbleweed over rose-patterned carpets, or the golden bird throbbing in its golden jail. The only sound now was the soft whisper that Grandma heard as her feverish body burned into old age.

In the center of the kitchen floor she dropped a pan of grease. "Well, look what I did!" she laughed. "Careful. Someone might slip and fall on that!" She did not mop it up, but sat on the far side of the kitchen.

"I'm ready," she announced to the silence.

The sunlight lay on her lap where she cradled a pot of peas. In her hand a paring knife moved to open them. Her fingers tumbled the green

Pods. Time passed. The kitchen was so quiet you heard the refrigerator humming behind its pressed-tight rubber seals around the door. Grandma smiled a pressed and similar smile and unhinged the pods.

The kitchen door opened and shut quietly.

"Oh!" Grandma dropped her pan.

"Hello, Grandma," said Tom.

On the floor, near the grease spot, the peas were strewn like a broken necklace.

"You're back," said Grandma.

"I'm back," Tom said. "Liddy's in Glendale. I left her to shop. Said I forgot something. Said I'd pick her up in an hour."

They looked at each other.

"I hear you're going East, Grandma," he said.

"That's funny, I heard you were," she said.

"All of a sudden you left without a word," he said.

"All of a sudden you packed up and went," she said.

"No, you," he said.

"You," she said.

He took a step toward the grease spot.

Water which had gathered in the sink was jarred by his moves. It trickled down the Garburator's throat, which gave off a gentle chuckling wet sound.

Tom did not look down as his shoe slipped on the grease.

"Tom." Sunlight flickered on Grandma's paring knife. "What can I do for you?"

The postman dropped six letters in the Barton mailbox and listened.

"There's that lion again," he said. "Here comes someone," said the postman. "Singing."

Footsteps neared the door. A voice sang:

"Fee fie foe fum,

I smell the blood of an Englishmun,

Be he alive or be he dead,

I'll grr-innnd his bones to make my bread!"

The door flew wide.

"Morning!" cried Grandma, smiling.

The lion roared.

The End