

Ma Perkins Comes To Stay, Ray Bradbury

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Joe Tiller entered the apartment and was removing his hat when he saw the middle-aged, plump woman facing him, shelling peas.

'Come in,' she said to his startled face. 'Annie's out fetchin' supper. Set down.'

'But who—' He looked at her.

'I'm Ma Perkins.' She laughed, rocking. It was not a rocking chair, but somehow she imparted the sense of rocking to it. Tiller felt giddy. 'Just call me Ma,' she said airily.

'The name is familiar, but—'

'Never you mind, son. You'll get to know me. I'm staying on a year or so, just visitin'. And here she laughed comfortably and shelled a green pea.

Tiller rushed out to the kitchen and confronted his wife.

'Who in the hell is she, that nasty nice old woman?!' he cried.

'On the radio.' His wife smiled. 'You know. Ma Perkins.'

'Well, what's she doing here?' he shouted.

'Shh. She's come to help.'

'Help what?' He glared toward the other room.

'Things,' said his wife indefinitely.

'Where'll we put her, damn it? She has to sleep, doesn't she?'

'Oh yes,' said Anna, his wife, sweetly. 'But the radio's right there. At night she just sort of—well—"goes back."'

'Why did she come? Did you write to her? You never told me you knew her,' exclaimed the husband wildly.

'Oh, I've listened to her for years,' said Anna.

'That's different.'

'No. I've always felt I knew Ma better almost than I know—you,' said his wife.

He stood confounded. Ten years, he thought. Ten years alone in this chintz cell with her warm radio humming, the pink silver tubes burning, voices murmuring. Ten secret years of monastic conspiracy, radio and women, while he was holding his exploding business together. He decided to be very jovial and reasonable.

'What I want to know is'—he took her hand—'did you write "Ma" or call her up? How did she get here?'

'She's been here ten years.'

'Like hell she has!'

'Well today is special,' admitted his wife. 'Today's the first time she's ever "stayed."'

He took his wife to the parlor to confront the old woman. 'Get out,' he said.

Ma looked up from dicing some pink carrots and showed her teeth.

'Land, I can't. It's up to Annie, there. You'll have to ask her.'

He whirled. 'Well?' he said to his wife.

His wife's face was cold and remote. 'Let's all sit down to supper.' She turned and left the room.

Joe stood defeated.

Ma said, 'Now there's a girl with spunk.'

He arose at midnight and searched the parlor.
The room was empty.

The radio was still on, warm. Faintly, inside it, like a tiny mosquito's voice, he heard someone, far away saying, 'Land sakes, land sakes, land sakes, land o' Goshen!'

The room was cold. He shivered. The radio was warm with his ear against it.

'Land sakes, land o' Goshen, land sakes—'
He cut it off.
His wife heard him sink into bed.
'She's gone,' he said.

'Of course,' she said. 'Until tomorrow at ten.'
He did not question this.
'Good night, baby,' he said.

The living room was filled only with sunlight at breakfast. He laughed out loud to see the emptiness. He felt relief, like a good drink of wine, in himself. He whistled on his way to the office.

Ten o'clock was coffee time. Marching along the avenue, humming, he heard the radio playing in front of the electrical parts store.

'Shuffle,' said a voice. 'Lands, I wish you wouldn't track the house with your muddy shoes.'
He stopped. He pivoted like a wax figure, turning on its slow, cold axis, in the street.
He heard the voice.

'Ma Perkins's voice,' he whispered.
He listened.
'It's her voice,' he said. 'The woman who was at our house last night. I'm positive.'
And yet, late last night, the empty parlor?

But what about the radio, humming, warm, all alone in the room, and the faint faraway voice repeating and repeating, 'Land sakes, land sakes, land sakes...'?

He ran into a drugstore and dropped a nickel into the pay telephone slot.

Three buzzes. A short wait.

Click.

'Hello, Annie?' he said gaily.

'No, this is Ma,' said a voice.

'Oh,' he said.

He dropped the phone back onto its hook.

He didn't let himself think of it that afternoon. It was an impossible thing, a thing of some subtle and inferior horror. On his way home he purchased a bundle of fresh moist pink rosebuds for Anna. He had them in his right hand when he opened the door of his apartment. He had almost forgotten about Ma by then.

He dropped the rosebuds on the floor and did not stoop to retrieve them. He only stared and continued to stare at Ma, who was seated in that chair that did not rock, rocking.

Her sweet voice called cheerily. 'Evenin', Joe boy! Ain't you thoughtful, fetchin' home roses!'

Without a word he dialed a phone number.

'Hello, Ed? Say, Ed, you doing anything this evening?'

The answer was negative.

'Well, how about dropping up, then, I need your help, Ed.'

The answer was positive.

At eight o'clock they were finishing supper and Ma was clearing away the dishes. 'Now for dessert tomorrow,' she was saying, 'we'll have crisscross squash pie—'

The doorbell rang, and, answering, Joe Tiller almost hauled Ed Leiber out of his shoes. 'Take it easy, Joe,' said Ed, rubbing his hand.

'Ed,' said Joe, seating him with a small glass of sherry. 'You know my wife, and this is Ma Perkins.'

Ed laughed. 'How are you? Heard you on the radio for years!'

'It's no laughing matter, Ed,' said Joe. 'Cut it.'

'I didn't mean to be facetious, Mrs Perkins,' said Ed. 'It's just that your name is so similar to that fictional character—'

'Ed,' said Joe. 'This is Ma Perkins.'

'That's right,' said Ma charmingly, shelling some peas.

'You're all kidding me,' said Ed, looking around.

'No,' said Ma.

'She's come to stay and I can't get her out, Ed. Ed, you're a psychologist, what do I do? I want you to talk to Annie, here. It's all in her mind.'

Ed cleared his throat. 'This has gone far enough.' He walked over to touch Ma's hand. 'She's real, not a hallucination.' He touched Annie. 'Annie's real.' He touched Joe. 'You're real. We're real. How are things at work, Joe?'

'Don't change the subject, I'm serious. She's moved in and I want her moved out—'

'Well, that's for the OPA to decide, I guess, or the sheriff's office, not a psychologist—'

'Ed, listen to me, listen, Ed, I know it sounds crazy, but she really is the original Ma Perkins.'

'Let me smell your breath, Joe.'

'And I want her to stay on here with me,' said Annie. 'I get lonely days. I stay home and do the housework and I need company. I won't have her moved out. She's mine!'

Ed slapped his knee and exhaled. 'There you are, Joe. Looks like you want a divorce lawyer instead of a psychologist.'

Joe swore. 'I can't go off and leave her here in this old witch's clutches, don't you understand? I love her too much. There's no telling what may happen to her if I leave her alone here for the next year without communicating with the outer world!'

'Keep your voice down, Joe, you're screaming. Now, now.' The psychologist turned his attention to the old woman. 'What do you say? Are you Ma Perkins?'
'I am. From the radio.'

The psychologist wilted. There was something in the direct, honest way she said it. He began to look for the door, his hands twitching on his knees.

'And I came here because Annie needs me,' said Ma. 'Why I know this child better and she knows me better than her own husband.'

The psychologist said, 'Aha. Just a minute. Come along, Joe.' They stepped out into the hall and whispered. 'Joe, I hate to tell you this, but they're both—not well. Who is she? Your mother-in-law?'
'I told you, she's Ma—'

'God damn it, cut it out, I'm your friend, Joe. We're not in the room with them. We humor them, yes, but not me.' He was irritable.
Joe exhaled. 'Okay, have it your way. But you do believe I'm in a mess, don't you?'

'I do. What's the deal, have they both been sitting at home listening to the radio too much? That explains them both having the same idea at the same time.'

Joe was going to try to explain the whole thing, but gave up. Ed might think he was crazy, too. 'Will you help me? What can we do?'

'Leave that to me. I'll give them a little logic. Come on.'

They reentered, and refilled their glasses with sherry. Once comfortable again, Ed looked at the two ladies and said, 'Annie, this lady isn't Ma Perkins.'

'Oh, yes, she is,' said Annie angrily.

'No, because if she was I wouldn't be able to see her, only you could see her, do you understand?'

'No.'

'If she was Ma Perkins, I could make her disappear just by convincing you how illogical it is to think of her as real. I'd tell you she's nothing but a radio character made up by someone—'

'Young man,' said Ma. 'Life is life. One form's as good as another. I was born, maybe just in someone's head, but I'm born and kicking and getting more real every year that I live. You and you and you, every time you hear me, make me more real. Why, if I died tomorrow, everybody all over the country would cry, wouldn't they?'

'Well—'

'Wouldn't they?' she snapped.

'Yes, but only over an idea, not a real thing.'

'Over a thing they think is real. And thinkin' is bein', you young fool,' said Ma.

'It's no use,' said Ed. He turned once more to the wife. 'Look, Annie, this is your mother-in-law, her name really isn't Ma Perkins at all. It's yourmother-in-law.' He pronounced each word clearly and heavily.

'That'd be nice,' agreed Annie. 'I like that.'

'I wouldn't object,' said Ma. 'Worse things have happened in my life.'

'Are we all agreed now?' said Ed, surprised at his sudden success. 'She's your mother-in-law, Annie?'

'Yes.'

'And you're not Ma Perkins at all, right, ma'am?'

'Is it a plot, a game, a secret?' said Annie, looking at Ma.

Ma smiled.

'If you want to put it that way, yes.'

'But look here,' objected Joe.

'Shut up, Joe, you'll spoil everything.' To the other two, 'Now, let's repeat it. She's your mother-in-law. Her name is Ma Tiller.'

'Ma Tiller,' said the two women.

'I want to see you outside,' said Joe, and lurched Ed out of the room. He held him against the wall and threatened him with a fist. 'You fool! I don't want her to stay on, I want to get rid of her. Now you've helped make Annie worse, made her believe in that old witch!'

'Worse, you nut, I've cured her, both of them. Fine appreciation!' And Ed struggled to get free. 'I'll send a bill over in the morning!' He stalked down the hall.

Joe hesitated a moment before entering the room again. Oh God, he thought. God help me.

'Hello,' said Ma, looking up, preparing a home-packed bottle of cucumber pickles.

At midnight and breakfast again, the living room was empty. Joe got a crafty glint in his eyes. He looked at the radio and stroked the top of it with his trembling hand.

'Stay away from there!' cried his wife.

'Oho,' he said. 'Is this where she hides at night, in here, eh? In here! This is her coffin, eh, this is where the damn old vampire sleeps until tomorrow when her sponsor lets her out!'

'Keep your hands off,' she said hysterically.

'Well, that settles her hash.' He picked the radio up in his hands. 'How do you kill her sort of witch? With a silver bullet through the heart?'

With a crucifix? With wolfsbane? Or do you make the sign of a cross on a soapbox top? Eh, is that it?’

‘Give me that!’ His wife rushed over to grapple with him. Between them, they swayed back and forth in a titanic battle for the electric coffin between them.

‘There!’ he shouted.

He flung the radio to the floor. He tromped and stomped on it. He kicked it into bits. He ravaged at it. He held the tubes in his hands and smashed them into silver flinders. Then he stuffed the shattered entrails into the wastebasket, all the time his wife danced frantically about, sobbing and screaming.

‘She’s dead,’ he said. ‘Dead, God damn it! I’ve fixed her good.’

His wife cried herself to sleep. He tried to calm her, but she was so deep in her hysteria he could not touch her. Death was a terrible incident in her life.

In the morning, she spoke not a word. In the coolness of the separated house, he ate his breakfast, confident that things would be better by evening.

He arrived late to work. He walked between the typing, clicking rows of stenographers’ desks, passed on down the long hallway, and opened the door of his secretary’s office.

His secretary was standing against her desk, her face pale, her hands up to her lips. ‘Oh, Mr Tiller, I’m so glad you came,’ she said. ‘In there.’ She pointed at the door to the inner office. ‘That awful old busybody! She just came in and—and—’ She hurried to the door, flung it open. ‘You’d better see her!’

He felt sick to his stomach. He shuffled across the threshold and shut the door. Then he turned to confront the old woman who was in his office.

‘How did you get here?’ he demanded.

'Why, good morning.' Ma Perkins laughed, peeling potatoes in his swivel chair, her tidy little black shoes twinkling in the sunlight. 'Come on in. I decided your business needed reorganizing. So I just started. We're partners now. I had lotsa experience in this line. I saved more failing businesses, more bad romances, more lives. You're just what I need.'

'Get out,' he said flatly, his mouth tight.

'Why now, young man, cheer up. We'll have your business turned around in no time. Just let an old woman philosophize and tell you how—'

'You heard what I said,' he grated. 'Isn't it enough I had trouble with you at my house?'

'Who, me?' She shook her head. 'Sakes, I never been to your house.'
'Liar!' he cried. 'You tried to break up our home!'

'I only been here in the office, for six months now,' she said.
'I never saw you here before.'

'Oh, I been around, around, I been observin'. I seed your business was bad, I thought I'd just give you some gumption you need.'

Then he realized how it was. There were two Mas. One here, one at home. Two? No, a million. A different one in every home. None aware of the others' separate lives. All different, as shaped by the individual brains of those who heard and lived in the far homes. 'I see,' he said. 'So you're takin' over, moving in on me, are you, you old bastard?'

'Sech language.' She chuckled, making a crisscross pie on his green blotter, rolling out the yellow dough with plump fingers.

'Who is it?' he snarled.

'Eh?'

'Who is it, who's the traitor in this office?!' he bellowed. 'The one who listens to you in secret here, on my time?'

'Ask me no questions, I'll tell you no fibs,' she said, pouring cinnamon out of his inkwell onto the piecrust dough.

'Just wait!' He rammed the door open and ran past his secretary and out into the big room. 'Attention!' He waved his arms. The typing stopped. The ten stenographers and clerks turned away from their shiny black machines. 'Listen,' he said. 'Is there a radio somewhere in this office?'

Silence.

'You heard what I said,' he demanded, glaring at them with hot eyes. 'Is there a radio?'

A trembling silence.

'I'll give a bonus and a guarantee I won't fire her, to anyone who tells me where the radio is!' he announced.

One of the little blond stenographers put up her hand.

'In the ladies' restroom,' she whimpered. 'Cigarette time, we play it low.'

'God bless you!'

In the hall, he pounced on the restroom door. 'Is anyone in there?' he called. Silence. He opened the door. He entered.

The radio was on the window ledge. He seized it, jerking at its wires. He felt as if he were clutching at the live intestines of some horrible animal. He opened the window and flung it out. Somewhere there was a scream. The radio burst into bomb fragments on the roof below.

He slammed the window and went back to his office door.

The office was empty.

He picked up his inkwell and shook it until it gave forth—
Ink.

Driving home, he considered what he had said to the office force. Never another radio, he had said. Whoever is responsible for another radio will be fired out of hand. Fired, did they understand!

He walked up the flight of stairs and stopped.

A party was going on in his apartment. He heard his wife laughing, drinks being passed, music playing, voices.

'Oh, Ma, aren't you the one?'

'Pepper, where are you?'

'Out here, Dad!'

'Fluffy, let's play spin the bottle!'

'Henry, Henry Aldrich, put down that platter before you break it!'

'John, oh, John, John!'

'Helen, you look lovely—'

'And I said to Dr Trent—'

'I want you to meet Dr. Christian and—'

'Sam, Sam Spade, this is Philip Marlowe—'

'Hello, Marlowe.'

'Hello, Spade!'

Gushing laughter. Rioting. Tinkling glass.

Voices.

Joe fell against the wall. Warm perspiration rolled down his face. He put his hands to his throat and wanted to scream. Those voices. Familiar. Familiar. All familiar. Where had he heard them before? Friends of Annie's? And yet she had no friends. None. He could remember none of her few friends' voices. And these names, these strange familiar names—?

He swallowed drily. He put his hand to the door.

Click.

The voices vanished. The music was cut off. The tinkling of glass ceased. The laughter faded in a great wind.

When he stepped through the door, it was like coming into a room an instant after a hurricane has left by the window. There was a sense of loss, a vacuum, an emptiness, a vast silence. The walls ached.

Annie sat looking at him.

'Where did they go?' he said.

'Who?' She tried to look surprised.

'Your friends,' he said.

'What friends?' She raised her eyebrows.

'You know what I'm talking about,' he said.

'No,' she said firmly.

'What'd you do? Go buy a new radio?'

'And what if I did?'

He took a step forward, his hands groping the air. 'Where is it?'

'I won't tell.'

'I'll find it,' he said.

'I'll only buy another and another,' she said.

'Annie, Annie,' he said, stopping. 'How long are you going to carry this crazy thing on? Don't you see what's happening?'

She looked at the wall. 'All I know is that you've been a bad husband, neglecting me, ignoring me. You're gone, and when you're gone, I have my friends, and my friends and I have parties and I watch them live and die and walk around, and we drink drinks and have affairs, oh yes, you wouldn't believe it, have affairs, my dear Joseph!

And we have martinis and daiquiris and manhattans, my good Joseph! And we sit and talk and crochet or cook or even take trips to Bermuda or anywhere at all, Rio, Martinique, Paris! And now, tonight, we had such a grand party, until you came to haunt us!'

'Haunt you!' he shrieked, eyes wild.

'Yes,' she whispered. 'It's almost as if you're not real at all. As if you're some phantom from another world come to spoil our fun. Oh, Joseph, why don't you go away.'

He said slowly, 'You're insane. God help you, Annie, but you're insane.'

'Whether I am or not,' she said, at last, 'I've come to a decision. I'm leaving you, tonight. I'm going home to Mother!'

He laughed wearily. 'You haven't got a mother. She's dead.'

'I'm going anyway, home to Mother,' she said endlessly.

'Where's that radio?' he said.

'No,' she said. 'I wouldn't be able to go home if you took it. You can't have it.'

'Damn it!'

Someone knocked on the door.

He went to answer it. The landlord was there. 'You'll have to stop shouting,' he said. 'The neighbors are complaining.'

'I'm sorry,' said Joe, stepping outside and half shutting the door. 'We'll try to be quiet—'

Then he heard the running feet. Before he could turn, the door slammed and locked. He heard Annie cry out triumphantly. He hammered at the door. 'Annie, let me in, you fool!'

'Now, take it easy, Mr Tiller,' cautioned the landlord.

'That little idiot in there, I've got to get inside—'

He heard the voices again, the loud and the high voices, and the shrill wind blowing and the dancing music and the glasses tinkling. And a voice saying, 'Let him in, let him do whatever he wants. We'll fix him. So he'll never hurt us again.'

He kicked at the door.

'Stop that,' said the landlord. 'I'll call the police.'

'Call them, then!'

The landlord ran to find a phone.

Joe broke the door down.

Annie was sitting on the far side of the room. The room was dark, only the light from a little ten-dollar radio illuminating it. There were a lot of people there, or maybe shadows. And in the center of the room, in the rocking chair, was the old woman.

'Why, look who's here,' she said, enchanted.

He walked forward and put his fingers around her neck.

Ma Perkins tried to get free, screamed, thrashed, but could not.

He strangled her.

When he was done with her, he let her drop to the floor, the paring knife, the spilled peas flung everywhere. She was cold. Her heart was stopped. She was dead.

'That's just what we wanted you to do,' said Annie tonelessly, sitting in the dark.

'Turn the lights on,' he gasped, reeling. He staggered back across the room. What was it, anyway? A plot? Were they going to enter other rooms, all around the world? Was Ma Perkins dead, or just dead here? Was she alive everywhere else?

The police were coming in the door, the landlord behind them. They had guns. 'All right, buddy, up with them!'

They bent over the lifeless body on the floor. Annie was smiling. 'I saw it all,' she said. 'He killed her.' 'She's dead all right,' said one of the policemen. 'She's not real, she's not real,' sobbed Joe. 'She's not real, believe me.'

'She feels real to me,' said the cop. 'Dead as hell.' Annie smiled.

'She's not real, listen to me, she's Ma Perkins!' 'Yeah, and I'm Charlie's aunt. Come on along, fellow!' He felt himself turn and then it came to him, in one horrid rush, what it would be like from here on.

After tonight, him taken away, and Annie returned home, to her radio, alone in her room for the next thirty years. And all the little lonely people and the other people, the couples, and groups all over the country in the next thirty years, listening and listening.

And the lights changing to mists and the mists to shadows and the shadows to voices and the voices to shapes and the shapes to realities, until, at last, as here, all over the country, there would be rooms, with people in them, some real, some not, some controlled by unrealities, until all was a nightmare, one not knowable from the other.

Ten million rooms with ten million old women named Ma peeling potatoes in them, chuckling, philosophizing. Ten million rooms in which some boy named Aldrich played with marbles on the floor. Ten million rooms where guns barked and ambulances rumbled. God, God, what a huge, engulfing plot.

The world was lost, and he had lost it for them. It had been lost before he began. How many other husbands are starting the same fight tonight, doomed to lose at last, as he lost, because the rules of logic have been warped all out of shape by a little black evil electric box?

He felt the police snap the silver handcuffs tight.

Annie was smiling. And Annie would be here, night after night, with her wild parties and her laughter and travels, while he was far away.

'Listen to me!' he screamed.

'You're nuts!' said the cop, and hit him.

On the way down the hall, a radio was playing.

In the warm light of the room as they passed the door, Joe peered swiftly in, one instant. There, by the radio, rocking, was an old woman, shelling some fresh green peas.

He heard a door slam far away and his feet drifted.

He stared at the hideous old woman, or was it a man, who occupied the chair in the center of the warm and swept-clean living room. What was she doing? Knitting, shaving herself, peeling potatoes? Shelling peas? Was she sixty, eighty, one hundred, ten million years old?

He felt his jaw clench and his tongue lie cold and remote in his mouth.

‘Come in,’ said the old woman—old man. ‘Annie’s fixing dinner in the kitchen.’

‘Who are you?’ he asked, his heart trembling.

‘You know me,’ the person said, laughing shrilly. ‘I’m Ma Perkins. You know, you know, you know.’

In the kitchen he held to the wall and his wife turned toward him with a cheese grater in her hand. ‘Darling!’

‘Who’s—who’s—’ He felt drunk, his tongue thick. ‘Who’s that person in the living room, how did she get here?’

‘Why, it’s only Ma Perkins, you know, from the radio,’ his wife said with casual logic. She kissed him a sweet kiss on the mouth. ‘Are you cold? You’re shaking.’

He had time only to see her nod a smile before they dragged him on.

The End