

That Bird that Comes out of the Clock, Ray Bradbury

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"You remember people by the things they do," said Mrs. Coles, "rather than by how their face looks or what their tongues say, while they're doing what they do. Now, if you ask me, this new woman across the street and down two houses, Kit Random, that her name? She is, to put it mildly, a woman of action."

Everybody on the porch looked.

There was Kit Random with a flower in her hand, in the garden. There she was drawing the shade in the upstairs window. There fanning herself in the cool dark doorway of her front porch. There making mosquito-delicate etchings under a lemon-colored hurricane lamp at night. There throwing clay on a potter's wheel early mornings, singing in a loud clear-water voice. There shoving dozens of ashtrays into a kiln she had built of bricks.

And again you saw her baking pies for God knows who in her empty house and setting them to cool in windowsills so men on the far side of the street crossed over, noses lifted, passing. Then, when the sun set, she swung in a great hairy hemp swing she had tied to the vast oak in her backyard.

About nine at night, carrying a crank phonograph like the white Victrola dog in her hands, she'd come out, crank up the machine, put on a record, and swing in the giant child's swing, being a poor butterfly or a red red robin hop hop hoppingalong.

"Yes," said Mrs. Tiece. "She's either a very shrewd woman up to her feminine tricks or—" And here she debated a moment. "She's that little bird that comes out of the clock ... that little bird that comes out of the clock ... "

All along the street, women tapped their heads with knowing forefingers and looked over her fence, like women peering over a cliff, ready to scream at how high up they were, but all they saw was the nine o'clock backyard, as dim as a cavern full of sprouting leaves, starred with flowers, the phonograph hissing and clearing its throat before launching itself down the grooves of "June Night" or "Poor Butterfly."

And there, with the regularity of an unseen, but nevertheless ticking pendulum, back and forth, one arm up to cushion her pink little pillow of cheek, sighing quietly to herself, was Kit Random, swinging in her swing, in rhythm to the things the phonograph said were poor about the butterfly or nice about the June night.

"Where's she from?"

"No one knows."

"What's she doing here?"

"No one knows."

"How long's she going to stay?"

"Go askher!"

The facts were simple enough. The house had been unrented for a year, and then it was rented. One April afternoon a large moving van drove up and two men ran in and out, like Keystone Cops, the nearest thing to collision, but always skidding around each other with a fast-action routine of clocks, lamps, chairs, tables, and urns. In what seemed a minute they had driven away.

The house was left alone, unoccupied. Mrs. Coles had walked by it four times and peered in, and only seen that the moving men had hung the pictures, spread the rugs, adjusted the furniture, and made everything womanly and neat before they had come running out to go away. There was the nest, waiting for the bird.

And promptly at seven o'clock, just after supper, when everyone could see her, up drove Kit Random in a yellow taxicab, and moved into the waiting house, alone.

"Where's Mr. Random?" asked everyone. "There isn't any."

"Divorced, that's what she is, divorced. Or maybe her husband dead. A widow, that's better. Poor thing." But there was Kit Random smiling at every window and every porch, on her way to buy T-bone steaks, tomato soup, and dishwater soap, not looking tired, not looking sad, not looking alone, but looking as if a company of clowns lived with her by day, and a handsome film gentleman with a waxed mustache by night.

"But no one ever comes near her place. At first I thought, well ... " Mrs. Coles hesitated. "A woman living alone. Oh, you know. But there hasn't even been an iceman close. So there's only one thing to figure: as someone said, she's that bird that comes out of the clock. Four times an hour," she added.

At that very moment, Miss Kit Random called to the ladies, now her voice up in the soft green trees, now up in the blue sky on the opposite side of the yard. "Ladies?"

Their heads twisted. Their ears prickled.

"Ladies," called Miss Kit Random, in flight. "I've come to get me a man. That's it, ladies!"

All the ladies backed off to their houses.

It was the next afternoon that they found Mr. Tiece over in Miss Kit Random's front yard playing marbles. Mrs. Tiece put up with it for about two minutes and thirty-five seconds and then came across the street, almost on roller skates.

"Well, what're we doing?" she demanded of the two hunched-down figures.

"Just a moment." A marble spun bright under Henry Tiece's thumb. Other marbles spat against each other and clacked away.

"Looks like you won," said Kit Random. "You're darned good at mibs, Hank."

"It's been years." Mr. Tiece glanced uneasily at his wife's ankle. She had veins like runners of light blue ink on her legs. It looked like the map of Illinois. Desplaines River here, Mississippi there. He scanned up as far as Rock Island when his wife said:

"Isn't it a little strange playing marbles?"

"Strangething?" Mr. Tiece dusted himself off. "Iwon!"

"What you going to do with them marbles?"

"It's not what I do with them, it's victory that counts."

Mrs. Tiece glared at them as if they were toadstools. "Thanks for giving Henry a game."

"Anytime, Clara, anytime," said Kit Random.

"I'll just leave these with you." Henry handed over the marbles hastily.

"No room at my place."

"I want you to cut the grass," said Mrs. Tiece.

He and Mrs. Tiece sort of walked across the street, he not looking at her, she keeping up so he walked faster, she increasing her pace, he increasing his until they almost leaped up the porch steps. He ran to the door first, she tailed after. The door-slam was such that birds abandoned their nests three houses down.

The next incident occurred exactly an hour later. Mr. Tiece was out mowing the lawn, his eyes fixed to the rotating machine and each of one hundred clover blossoms, all with tiny heads like Mrs. Tiece.

He cut furiously east, west, north, south, perspiring and wiping his brow as Mrs. Tiece shouted, "Don't miss the outer drive! And down the middle, you missed a ridge. Watch that stone, you'll ruin the cutter!"

Exactly at two o'clock two trucks drove up in front of Miss Kit Random's house and a couple of laborers began tossing dirt out of Miss Random's lawn. By four o'clock they poured a solid sheet of cement all over Miss Random's yard.

At five o'clock, the truck drove off, taking Miss Kit Random's lawn with it, at which point Miss Kit Random waved over to Mr. Tiece. "Won't have to mow this lawn again for a couple years I guess!" She laughed.

Mr. Tiece started to laugh back when he sensed someone hidden inside the dark screen door. Mr. Tiece ducked inside. This time, with the door-slam, two potted geraniums fell off the porch rail.

"The nerve of that woman."

"Did it on purpose."

"Trying to make us look like slave drivers. Putting cement over her lawn. Giving Mr. Tiece ideas. Well, we're not cementing our lawn, he'll cut it every week, or my name isn't Clara Moon Tiece!"

The three ladies snorted over their knitting.

"Seems like some sort of plot to me," said Mrs. Coles. "Look at her backyard, a jungle, nothing in its right place."

"Tell us about the marble game again, Clara."

"Good grief. There he was down on his knees, both laughing. I—wait a minute. You hear something?"

It was twilight, just after supper, and the three women on Mrs. Coles' porch right next door. "That Clock Woman's out in her backyard again, laughing."

"Swinging in her swing?"

"Listen. Shh!"

"I haven't done this in years!" a man's voice laughed. "Always wanted to, but folks think you're crazy! Hey!"

"Who's that?" cried Mrs. Coles.

The three women clapped their hands to their thumping chests and lurched to the far end of the porch, panicked excursioners on a sinking ship.

"Here you go!" cried Kit Random, giving a push.

And there in her backyard going up in the green leaves one way, then down and swooping up on the other, in the twilight air was a laughing man.

"Don't that sound a bit like your Mr. Coles?" one of the ladies wondered.

"The idea!"

"Oh, Fanny."

"The idea!"

"Oh, Fanny, go to sleep," said Mr. Coles in bed. The room was warm and dark. She sat like a great lump of ice cream glowing in the dim room at eleven o'clock.

"Ought to be run out of town."

"Oh, for God's sake." He punched his pillow. "It was just a backyard swing, haven't swung in years. Big damn swing, plenty hefty to ride a man. You left me to finish the dishes so you could go out and blather with those hens, I went to toss out the garbage and there she was swinging in the swing and I said how nice it looked and she said did I want to try? So, by God, I just climbed over to pump myself up for a ride."

"And cackling like an idiot rooster."

"Not cackling, damn it, but laughing. I wasn't pinching her behind, was I?" He punched his pillow twice more and rolled over.

In his sleep she heard him mumble, "Best damn swing I ever swung," which set her off into a new fit of weeping.

It remained only for Mr. Clements to jump off the cliff the next afternoon. Mrs. Clements found him blowing bubbles on Miss Kit Random's back garden wall, discussing the formation, clarity, and coloration of same with her. Her phonograph was warbling an old tune from World War I sung by the Knickerbocker Quartet titled "The Worst Is Yet to Come." Mrs. Clements acted out the song's words by grabbing Mr. Clements by the ear and lugging him off.

"That woman's yard," said Mrs. Coles, Mrs. Clements, and Mrs. Tiece, "is, as of this hour, day, and minute, forbidden territory."

"Yes, dear," said Mr. Coles, Mr. Clements, and Mr. Tiece,

"You are not to say good morning or good night, Nurse, to her," said Mrs. Coles, Mrs. Clements, and Mrs. Tiece.

"Of course not, dear," said the husbands behind their newspapers.

"Youhearme?"

"Yes, sweetheart," came the chorus. From then on Mr. Coles, Mr. Clements, and Mr. Tiece could be seen mowing lawns, fixing lights, trimming hedges, painting doors, cleaning windows, washing dishes, digging bulbs, watering trees, fertilizing flowers, rushing to work, rushing back, bending, flexing, running, pausing, reaching, busy at a thousand and one tasks with a thousand and one perspirations.

Whereas in Kit Random's clocks had stopped, flowers died or went insane with abundance. Doorknobs fell off if you tapped them, trees shed their leaves in mid-summer for lack of water; paint flaked from

doors, and the electric light-system, burnt out, was replaced with candles rammed in wine jugs: a paradise of neglect, a beautiful chaos.

Somewhere along the line Mrs. Coles, Mrs. Clements and Mrs. Tiece were stunned at the pure unadulterated nerve of Kit Random shoving notes in their mailboxes during the night, inviting them to come by at four next day for poisoned tea.

They absolutely refused.
And went.

Kit Random poured them all the orange pekoe which was her favorite and then sat back, smiling.

"It was nice of you ladies to come," she said.

The ladies nodded grimly.

"There's a lot for us to talk about," she added.

The ladies waited stone-cold, leaning toward the door.

"I feel you don't understand me at all," said Kit Random. "I feel I must explain everything."

They waited.

"I'm a maiden lady with a private income."

"Look suspiciously private to me," observed Mrs. Tiece.

"Suspiciously," echoed Mrs. Cole.

Mrs. Clements was about to toss her teabag in the cup when Kit Random uncorked a laugh.

"I can see no matter what I say you'll add sugar lumps and stir your spoons so loud I can't be heard."

"Try us," said Mrs. Tiece.

Kit Random reached over to pick up a shiny brass tube and twist it.

"What's that?" asked all three at once and then covered their mouths as if embarrassed not one of them had said anything original.

"One of them toy kaleidoscopes." Kit Random shut one eye to squint through the odd-colored shards. "Right now I'm examining your gizzards. Know what I find?"

"How could we possibly care?" cried Mrs. Clements. The others nodded at her snappy retort.

"I see a solid potato." Kit Random fixed the device to X-ray Mrs. Tiece, then moved to the others. "A rutabaga and a nice round turnip. No innards, stomach, spleen, or heart. I've listened. No pulse, just solid flesh, fit to burst your corsets. And your tongues? Not connected to your cerebral cortex ... "

"Our cerebralwhat?" cried Mrs. Tiece, offended.

"Cortex. Not as off-color as it sounds. And I've made a brave decision. Don't get up."

The three women squirmed in their chairs and Kit Random said:

"I'm going to take your husbands, one by one. I'm going to, in the words of the old song, steal their hearts away. Or what's there if you left any on the plate. I've decided that flimsy-whimsy as I am, I'll be a darn sight better midnight or high-noon companion than all of you in a bunch. Don't speak, don't leave. I'm almost done. There's nothing you can do to stop me. Oh, yes, one thing. Love these fine men.

But I don't think it crossed your minds, it's so long ago. Look at their faces. See how they crush their straw hats down hard over their ears and grind their teeth in their sleep. Heck, I can hear it way overhere! And make fists when they walk, with no one to hit. So stand back, don't even try to interfere.

And how will I do it? With cribbage and dead man's poker, and miniature golf in my garden, I'll pull flowers to sink par-three holes. Then there's blackjack, dominoes, checkers, chess, beer and ice cream, hot dogs noons, hamburgers midnights, phonograph moonlight dancing, fresh beds, clean linens, singing in the shower allowed, litter

all week, clean up on Sundays, grow a mustache or beard, go barefoot at croquet. When the beer stops, gin stays.

Hold on! Sit!" Kit Random lectured on:

"I can see what you think, you got faces like sieves. No, I'm not the Hoor of Babylon, nor the Tart from Le Petit Trianon, which, incidentally, is nota movie-house. I am a traveling Jungle Gym, first cousin to a sideshow, never a beauty, almost a freak. But one day years back, I decided not to makeoneman sad but ahandfulhappy!

I found I was trying to win all the time, which is an error beyond most women's imagination. If you make a man lose all the time, hell, he'll go play golf or handball and loseright. At least he can add it up!

So I started out, two years in Placerville, three in Tallahassee and Kankakee until I ran out of steam or my rolling stock rusted. What was my great secret? Not playing Par-cheesi, or Uncle Wiggily says jump back three hops to the henhouse, no. It waslosing. Don't you see?

I learned how to cheat and lose. Menlikethat. They know what you're up to, sure, but pretend not to notice and the more you lose the more they love. Next thing you know you got 'em bound head and foot with just plain old self-destruction pinochle or I'm-dead-send-flowers hopscotch. You can get a man to jump rope if you convince him he's the greatest jumper since the Indian rope trick. So you go on losing and find you've won all along as the men tip their hat to you at breakfast, put down the stock-market quotes andtalk!

"Stop fidgeting! I'm almost out of gas. Will you get your halfway loved ones back? Mebbe. Mebbe not. A year from now I'll check to see if you've watched and learned from my show-and-tell. I'll give you the loan of those lost but now found souls and once a year after that bus back through to see if you're losing proper in order to learn to laugh.

Meanwhile, there's nothing you can do, starting this very second. Now, consider I've just fired off a gun. Go home. Bake pies. Make meatballs. But it won't work. The pies will fall flat and the meatballs? Dead on

arrival. Because you arm-wrestle them to the table and spoil men's appetites. And don't lock your doors. Let the poor beasts run. Like you've excused."

"We've just begun to fight!" cried all three and then, confused at their echoes, almost fell down the porch stairs.

Well, that was the true end. There was no war, not even a battle or half a skirmish. Every time the ladies glanced around they found empty rooms and quietly shut on tiptoes front doors.

But what really scalded the cat and killed the dog was when three strange men showed up half-seen in the twilight one late afternoon and caused the wives to pull back, double-lock their doors, and peer through their lace curtains.

"Okay, open up!" the three men cried.

And hearing voices from today's breakfast, the wives unlocked the doors to squint out.

"Henry Tiece?"

"Robert Joe Clements, what—?"

"William Ralph Cole, is that you?"

"Who the hell do you think it is!"

Their wives stood back to watch the almost hairless wonders pass.

"My God," said Mrs. Tiece.

"What?" said Mrs. Clements.

"What have you done to your hair?"

"Nothing," said all three husbands. "Shedid."

The wives circled their relatives by marriage.

"I didn't recognize you," gasped Mrs. Tiece.

"You weren't supposed to!"

And so said all the rest.

Adding, "How you like it?"

"It's not the man I married," they said.

"Damn tootin'!"

And at last, almost in chorus, though in separate houses:

"You going to change your name to fit the haircut?"

The last night of the month, Mr. Tiece was found in his upper-stairs bedroom packing a grip. Mrs. Tiece clutched a doorknob and held on.

"Where you going?"

"Business."

"Where?"

"A ways."

"Going to be gone long?"

"Hard to say," he said, packing a shirt.

"Two days?" she asked.

"Maybe."

"Three days?"

"Where's my blue necktie? The one with the white mice on it."

"I never did like that necktie."

"Would you mind finding the blue necktie with the white mice on it for me?"

She found it.

"Thank you." He knotted it, watching himself in the mirror. He brushed his hair and grimaced to see if he had brushed his teeth.

"Four days?" she asked.

"In all probability," he said.

"A week then?" She smiled wildly.

"You can almost bet on it," he said, examining his fingernails.

"Eat good meals now, not just quick sandwiches."

"I promise."

"Get plenty of sleep!"

"I'll get plenty of sleep."

"And be sure to phone every night. Have you got your stomach pills with you?"

"Won't need the stomach pills."

"You've always needed the stomach pills." She ran to fetch them. "Now, you just take these stomach pills."

He took and put them in his pocket. He picked up his two suitcases.

"And be sure and call me every night," she said.

He went downstairs with her after.

"And don't sit in any draughts."

He kissed her on the brow, opened the front door, went out, shut the door.

At almost the same instant, so it couldn't have been coincidence, Mr. Cole and Mr. Clements plunged, blind with life, off their front porches, risking broken legs or ankles to be free, and raced out to mid-street where they all but collided with Mr. Tiece.

They glanced at each other's faces and luggage and in reverberative echoes cried:

"Where're you going?"

"What's that?"

"My suitcase."

"My valise."

"My overnight case!"

"Do you realize this is the first time we've met in the middle of the street since Halloween twenty years ago?"

"Hell, this is Halloween!"

"Yeah! For what? Trick or treat?"

"Let's go see!"

And unerringly, with no chart, map, or menu, they turned with military abruptness and headlong sparked Kit Random's yardwide cement with their heels.

In the next week the sounds that abounded in Kit Random's abode might as well have been a saloon bowling alley. In just a handful of days, three various husbands visited at nine, ten, then ten after midnight, all with smiles like fake celluloid teeth hammered in place.

The various wives checked their breaths for liquid sustenance but inhaled only tart doses of medicinal mint; the men wisely gargled mid-street before charging up to confront their fortress Europas.

As for the disdained and affronted wives, what culinary battlements did they rear up? What counterattacks ensued? And if small battles, or skirmishes, were fought, did victories follow?

The problem was that the husbands backing off and then headlong racing off let all of the hot air out of their houses.

Only cold air remained, with three ladies delivered out of ice floes, refrigerated in their corsets, stony of glance and smile that in delivering victuals to the table caused frost to gather on the silverware.

Hot roast beef became tough icebox leftovers two minutes from the oven. As the husbands glanced sheepishly up from their now more infrequent meals, they were greeted with displays of glass eyes like those in the optician's downtown window at midnight, and smiles that echoed fine porcelain when they opened and shut to let out what should have been laughter but was pure death rattle.

And then at last a night came when three dinners were laid on three tables by candlelight and no one came home and the candles snuffed out all by themselves, while across the way the sound of horseshoes clanking the stake or, if you really listened close, taffy being pulled, or Al Jolson singing, "Hard-hearted Hannah, the vamp of Savannah, I don't mean New Orleans," made the three wives count the cutlery, sharpen the knives, and drink Lydia Pinkham's Female Remedy long before the sun was over the yardarm.

But the last straw that broke the camel herd was the men ducking through a whirllaround garden sprinkler one untimely hot autumn night

and, seeing their wives in a nearby window, they yelled, "Come on in, the water's fine!"

All three ladies gave the window a grand slam.

Which knocked five flowerpots off rails, skedaddled six cats, and had ten dogs howling at no-moon-in-the-sky halfway to dawn.

The End