



The Whole Town's Sleeping, Ray Bradbury

## The Whole Town's Sleeping

The courthouse clock chimed seven times. The echoes of the chimes faded.

Warm summer twilight here in upper Illinois country in this little town deep far away from everything, kept to itself by a river and a forest and a meadow and a lake. The sidewalks still scorched. The stores closing and the streets shadowed. And there were two moons; the clock moon with four faces in four night directions above the solemn black courthouse, and the real moon rising in vanilla whiteness from the dark east.

In the drugstore fans whispered in the high ceiling. In the rococo shade of porches, a few invisible people sat. Cigars glowed pink, on occasion. Screen doors whined their springs and slammed. On the purple bricks of the summer-night streets, Douglas Spaulding ran; dogs and boys followed after.

"Hi, Miss Lavinia!"

The boys loped away. Waving after them quietly, Lavinia Nebbs sat all alone with a tall cool lemonade in her white fingers, tapping it to her lips, sipping, waiting.

"Here I am, Lavinia."

She turned and there was Francine, all in snow white, at the bottom steps of the porch, in the smell of zinnias and hibiscus.

Lavinia Nebbs locked her front door and, leaving her lemonade glass half empty on the porch, said, "It's a fine night for the movie."

They walked down the street.

"Where you going, girls?" cried Miss Fern and Miss Roberta from their porch over the way.

Lavinia called back through the soft ocean of darkness: "To the Elite Theater to see CHARLIE CHAPLIN!"

“Won’t catch us out on no night like this,” wailed Miss Fern. “Not with the Lonely One strangling women. Lock ourselves up in our closet with a gun.”

“Oh, bosh!” Lavinia heard the old women’s door bang and lock, and she drifted on, feeling the warm breath of summer night shimmering off the oven-baked sidewalks. It was like walking on a hard crust of freshly warmed bread. The heat pulsed under your dress, along your legs, with a stealthy and not unpleasant sense of invasion.

“Lavinia, you don’t believe all that about the Lonely One, do you?”  
“Those women like to see their tongues dance.”

“Just the same, Hattie McDollis was killed two months ago, Roberta Ferry the month before, and now Elizabeth Ramsell’s disappeared. . . .”  
“Hattie McDollis was a silly girl, walked off with a traveling man, I bet.”  
“But the others, all of them, strangled, their tongues sticking out their mouths, they say.”

They stood upon the edge of the ravine that cut the town half in two. Behind them were the lit houses and music, ahead was deepness, moistness, fireflies and dark.

“Maybe we shouldn’t go to the show tonight,” said Francine. “The Lonely One might follow and kill us. I don’t like that ravine. Look at it, will you!”

Lavinia looked and the ravine was a dynamo that never stopped running, night or day; there was a great moving hum, a bumbling and murmuring of creature, insect, or plant life. It smelled like a greenhouse, of secret vapors and ancient, washed shales and quicksands.

And always the black dynamo humming, with sparkles like great electricity where fireflies moved on the air.

“It won’t be me coming back through this old ravine tonight late, so darned late; it’ll be you, Lavinia, you down the steps and over the bridge and maybe the Lonely One there.”

“Bosh!” said Lavinia Nebbs.

“It’ll be you alone on the path, listening to your shoes, not me. You all alone on the way back to your house. Lavinia, don’t you get lonely living in that house?”

“Old maids love to live alone.” Lavinia pointed at the hot shadowy path leading down into the dark. “Let’s take the short cut.”

“I’m afraid!”

“It’s early. Lonely One won’t be out till late.” Lavinia took the other’s arm and led her down and down the crooked path into the cricket warmth and frog sound and mosquito-delicate silence. They brushed through summer-scorched grass, burs prickling at their bare ankles.

“Let’s run!” gasped Francine.

“No!”

They turned a curve in the path—and there it was.

In the singing deep night, in the shade of warm trees, as if she had laid herself out to enjoy the soft stars and the easy wind, her hands at either side of her like the oars of a delicate craft, lay Elizabeth Ramsell! Francine screamed.

“Don’t scream!” Lavinia put out her hands to hold onto Francine, who was whimpering and choking. “Don’t! Don’t!”

The woman lay as if she had floated there, her face moonlit, her eyes wide and like flint, her tongue sticking from her mouth.

“She’s dead!” said Francine. “Oh, she’s dead, dead! She’s dead!”

Lavinia stood in the middle of a thousand warm shadows with the crickets screaming and the frogs loud.

“We’d better get the police,” she said at last.

Hold me, Lavinia, hold me, I’m cold, oh, I’ve never been so cold in all my life!”

Lavinia held Francine and the policemen were brushing through the crackling grass, flashlights ducked about, voices mingled, and the night grew toward eight-thirty.

“It’s like December. I need a sweater,” said Francine, eyes shut, against Lavinia.

The policeman said, “I guess you can go now, ladies. You might drop by the station tomorrow for a little more questioning.”

Lavinia and Francine walked away from the police and the sheet over the delicate thing upon the ravine grass.

Lavinia felt her heart going loudly in her and she was cold, too, with a February cold; there were bits of sudden snow all over her flesh, and the moon washed her brittle fingers whiter, and she remembered doing all the talking while Francine just sobbed against her.

A voice called from far off, “You want an escort, ladies?”

“No, we’ll make it,” said Lavinia to nobody, and they walked on. They walked through the nuzzling, whispering ravine, the ravine of whispers and clicks, the little world of investigation growing small behind them with its lights and voices.

“I’ve never seen a dead person before,” said Francine.

Lavinia examined her watch as if it was a thousand miles away on an arm and wrist grown impossibly distant. “It’s only eight-thirty. We’ll pick up Helen and get on to the show.”

“The show!” Francine jerked.

“It’s what we need. We’ve got to forget this. It’s not good to remember. If we went home now we’d remember. We’ll go to the show as if nothing happened.”

“Lavinia, you don’t mean it!”

“I never meant anything more in my life. We need to laugh now and forget.”

“But Elizabeth’s back there—your friend, my friend—”

“We can’t help her; we can only help ourselves. Come on.”

They started up the ravine side, on the stony path, in the dark. And suddenly there, barring their way, standing very still in one spot, not

seeing them, but looking on down at the moving lights and the body and listening to the official voices, was Douglas Spaulding.

He stood there, white as a mushroom, with his hands at his sides, staring down into the ravine.

“Get home!” cried Francine.

He did not hear.

“You!” shrieked Francine. “Get home, get out of this place, you hear? Get home, get home, get home!”

Douglas jerked his head, stared at them as if they were not there. His mouth moved. He gave a bleating sound. Then, silently, he whirled about and ran. He ran silently up the distant hills into the warm darkness.

Francine sobbed and cried again and, doing this, walked on with Lavinia Nebbs.

“There you are! I thought you ladies’d never come!” Helen Greer stood tapping her foot atop her porch steps. “You’re only an hour late, that’s all. What happened?”

“We—” started Francine.

Lavinia clutched her arm tight. “There was a commotion. Somebody found Elizabeth Ramsell in the ravine.”

“Dead? Was she—dead?”

Lavinia nodded. Helen gasped and put her hand to her throat. “Who found her?”

Lavinia held Francine’s wrist firmly. “We don’t know.”

The three young women stood in the summer night looking at each other. “I’ve got a notion to go in the house and lock the doors,” said Helen at last.

But finally she went to get a sweater, for though it was still warm, she, too, complained of the sudden winter night. While she was gone Francine whispered frantically, “Why didn’t you tell her?”

“Why upset her?” said Lavinia. “Tomorrow. Tomorrow’s plenty of time.”

The three women moved along the street under the black trees, past suddenly locked houses. How soon the news had spread outward from the ravine, from house to house, porch to porch, telephone to telephone. Now, passing, the three women felt eyes looking out at them from curtained windows as locks rattled into place.

How strange the popsicle, the vanilla night, the night of close-packed ice cream, of mosquito-lotioned wrists, the night of running children suddenly veered from their games and put away behind glass, behind wood, the popsicles in melting puddles of lime and strawberry where they fell when the children were scooped indoors.

Strange the hot rooms with the sweating people pressed tightly back into them behind the bronze knobs and knockers. Baseball bats and balls lay upon the unfootprinted lawns. A half-drawn, white-chalk game of hopscotch lay on the broiled, steamed sidewalk. It was as if someone had predicted freezing weather a moment ago.

“We’re crazy being out on a night like this,” said Helen.

“Lonely One won’t kill three ladies,” said Lavinia. “There’s safety in numbers. And besides, it’s too soon. The killings always come a month separated.”

A shadow fell across their terrified faces. A figure loomed behind a tree. As if someone had struck an organ a terrible blow with his fist, the three women gave off a scream, in three different shrill notes.

“Got you!” roared a voice. The man plunged at them. He came into the light, laughing. He leaned against a tree, pointing at the ladies weakly, laughing again.

“Hey! I’m the Lonely One!” said Frank Dillon.

“Frank Dillon!”

“Frank!”

“Frank,” said Lavinia, “if you ever do a childish thing like that again, may someone riddle you with bullets!”

“What a thing to do!”

Francine began to cry hysterically.

Frank Dillon stopped smiling. “Say, I’m sorry.”

“Go away!” said Lavinia. “Haven’t you heard about Elizabeth Ramsell—found dead in the ravine? You running around scaring women! Don’t speak to us again!”

“Aw, now—”

They moved. He moved to follow.

“Stay right there, Mr. Lonely One, and scare yourself. Go take a look at Elizabeth Ramsell’s face and see if it’s funny. Good night!” Lavinia took the other two on along the street of trees and stars, Francine holding a kerchief to her face.

“Francine, it was only a joke.” Helen turned to Lavinia. “Why’s she crying so hard?”

“We’ll tell you when we get downtown. We’re going to the show no matter what! Enough’s enough. Come on now, get your money ready, we’re almost there!”

The drugstore was a small pool of sluggish air which the great wooden fans stirred in tides of arnica and tonic and soda-smell out onto the brick streets.

“I need a nickel’s worth of green peppermint chews,” said Lavinia to the druggist. His face was set and pale, like all the faces they had seen on the half-empty streets. “For eating in the show,” said Lavinia as the druggist weighed out a nickel’s worth of the green candy with a silver shovel.

“You sure look pretty tonight, ladies. You looked cool this afternoon, Miss Lavinia, when you was in for a chocolate soda. So cool and nice that someone asked after you.”

“Oh?”

“Man sitting at the counter—watched you walk out. Said to me, ‘Say, who’s that?’ Why, that’s Lavinia Nebbs, prettiest maiden lady in town, I



said. 'She's beautiful,' he said. 'Where does she live?'" Here the druggist paused uncomfortably.

"You didn't!" said Francine. "You didn't give him her address, I hope? You didn't!"

"I guess I didn't think. I said, 'Oh, over on Park Street, you know, near the ravine.' A casual remark. But now, tonight, them finding the body, I heard a minute ago, I thought, My God, what've I done!" He handed over the package, much too full.

"You fool!" cried Francine, and tears were in her eyes.

"I'm sorry. Course, maybe it was nothing."

Lavinia stood with the three people looking at her, staring at her. She felt nothing. Except, perhaps, the slightest prickle of excitement in her throat. She held out her money automatically.

"There's no charge on those peppermints," said the druggist, turning to shuffle some papers.

"Well, I know what I'm going to do right now!" Helen stalked out of the drugshop. "I'm calling a taxi to take us all home. I'll be no part of a hunting party for you, Lavinia. That man was up to no good. Asking about you. You want to be dead in the ravine next?"

"It was just a man," said Lavinia, turning in a slow circle to look at the town.

"So is Frank Dillon a man, but maybe he's the Lonely One."

Francine hadn't come out with them, they noticed, and turning, they found her arriving. "I made him give me a description—the druggist. I made him tell what the man looked like. A stranger," she said, "in a dark suit. Sort of pale and thin."

"We're all overwrought," said Lavinia. "I simply won't take a taxi if you get one. If I'm the next victim, let me be the next. There's all too little excitement in life, especially for a maiden lady thirty-three years old, so don't you mind if I enjoy it. Anyway it's silly; I'm not beautiful."

“Oh, but you are, Lavinia; you’re the loveliest lady in town, now that Elizabeth is—” Francine stopped. “You keep men off at a distance. If you’d only relax, you’d been married years ago!”

“Stop sniveling, Francine! Here’s the theater box office, I’m paying forty-one cents to see Charlie Chaplin. If you two want a taxi, go on. I’ll sit alone and go home alone.”

“Lavinia, you’re crazy; we can’t let you do that—”

They entered the theater.

The first showing was over, intermission was on, and the dim auditorium was sparsely populated. The three ladies sat halfway down front, in the smell of ancient brass polish, and watched the manager step through the worn red velvet curtains to make an announcement.

“The police have asked us to close early tonight so everyone can be out at a decent hour. Therefore we are cutting our short subjects and running our feature again immediately. The show will be over at eleven. Everyone is advised to go straight home. Don’t linger on the streets.”

“That means us, Lavinia!” whispered Francine.

The lights went out. The screen leaped to life.

“Lavinia,” whispered Helen.

“What?”

“As we came in, a man in a dark suit, across the street, crossed over. He just walked down the aisle and is sitting in the row behind us.”

“Oh, Helen!”

“Right behind us?”

One by one the three women turned to look.

They saw a white face there, flickering with unholy light from the silver screen. It seemed to be all men’s faces hovering there in the dark.

“I’m going to get the manager!” Helen was gone up the aisle. “Stop the film! Lights!”

“Helen, come back!” cried Lavinia, rising.

They tapped their empty soda glasses down, each with a vanilla mustache on their upper lip, which they found with their tongues, laughing.

“You see how silly?” said Lavinia. “All that riot for nothing. How embarrassing.”

“I’m sorry,” said Helen faintly.

The clock said eleven-thirty now. They had come out of the dark theater, away from the fluttering rush of men and women hurrying everywhere, nowhere, on the street while laughing at Helen. Helen was trying to laugh at herself.

“Helen, when you ran up that aisle crying, ‘Lights!’ I thought I’d die! That poor man!”

“The theater manager’s brother from Racine!”

“I apologized,” said Helen, looking up at the great fan still whirling, whirling the warm late night air, stirring, restirring the smells of vanilla, raspberry, peppermint and Lysol.

“We shouldn’t have stopped for these sodas. The police warned—”

“Oh, bosh the police,” laughed Lavinia. “I’m not afraid of anything. The Lonely One is a million miles away now. He won’t be back for weeks and the police’ll get him then, just wait. Wasn’t the film wonderful?”

“Closing up, ladies.” The druggist switched off the lights in the cool white-tiled silence.

Outside, the streets were swept clean and empty of cars or trucks or people. Bright lights still burned in the small store windows where the warm wax dummies lifted pink wax hands fired with blue-white diamond rings, or flourished orange wax legs to reveal hosiery. The hot blue-glass eyes of the mannequins watched as the ladies drifted down the empty river bottom street, their images shimmering in the windows like blossoms seen under darkly moving waters.

“Do you suppose if we screamed they’d do anything?”

“Who?”

“The dummies, the window people.”

“Oh, Francine.”

“Well . . .”

There were a thousand people in the windows, stiff and silent, and three people on the street, the echoes following like gunshots from store fronts across the way when they tapped their heels on the baked pavement.

A red neon sign flickered dimly, buzzed like a dying insect, as they passed.

Baked and white, the long avenues lay ahead. Blowing and tall in a wind that touched only their leafy summits, the trees stood on either side of the three small women. Seen from the courthouse peak, they appeared like three thistles far away.

“First, we’ll walk you home, Francine.”

“No, I’ll walk you home.”

“Don’t be silly. You live way out at Electric Park. If you walked me home you’d have to come back across the ravine alone, yourself. And if so much as a leaf fell on you, you’d drop dead.”

Francine said, “I can stay the night at your house. You’re the pretty one!”

And so they walked, they drifted like three prim clothes forms over a moonlit sea of lawn and concrete, Lavinia watching the black trees flit by each side of her, listening to the voices of her friends murmuring, trying to laugh; and the night seemed to quicken, they seemed to run while walking slowly, everything seemed fast and the color of hot snow. “Let’s sing,” said Lavinia.

They sang, “Shine On, Shine On, Harvest Moon . . .”

They sang sweetly and quietly, arm in arm, not looking back. They felt the hot sidewalk cooling underfoot, moving, moving.

“Listen!” said Lavinia.

They listened to the summer night. The summer-night crickets and the far-off tone of the courthouse clock making it eleven forty-five.

“Listen!”

Lavinia listened. A porch swing creaked in the dark and there was Mr. Terle, not saying anything to anybody, alone on his swing, having a last cigar. They saw the pink ash swinging gently to and fro.

Now the lights were going, going, gone. The little house lights and big house lights and yellow lights and green hurricane lights, the candles and oil lamps and porch lights, and everything felt locked up in brass and iron and steel, everything, thought Lavinia, is boxed and locked and wrapped and shaded. She imagined the people in their moonlit beds.

And their breathing in the summer-night rooms, safe and together. And here we are, thought Lavinia, our footsteps on along the baked summer evening sidewalk. And above us the lonely street lights shining down, making a drunken shadow.

“Here’s your house, Francine. Good night.”

“Lavinia, Helen, stay here tonight. It’s late, almost midnight now. You can sleep in the parlor. I’ll make hot chocolate—it’ll be such fun!”

Francine was holding them both now, close to her.

“No, thanks,” said Lavinia.

And Francine began to cry.

“Oh, not again, Francine,” said Lavinia.

“I don’t want you dead,” sobbed Francine, the tears running straight down her cheeks. “You’re so fine and nice, I want you alive. Please, oh, please!”

“Francine, I didn’t know how much this has done to you. I promise I’ll phone when I get home.”

“Oh, will you?”

“And tell you I’m safe, yes. And tomorrow we’ll have a picnic lunch at Electric Park. With ham sandwiches I’ll make myself, how’s that? You’ll see, I’ll live forever!”

“You’ll phone, then?”

“I promised, didn’t I?”

“Good night, good night!” Rushing upstairs, Francine whisked behind a door, which slammed to be snap-bolted tight on the instant.

“Now,” said Lavinia to Helen, “I’ll walk you home.”

The courthouse clock struck the hour. The sounds blew across a town that was empty, emptier than it had ever been. Over empty streets and empty lots and empty lawns the sound faded.

“Nine, ten, eleven, twelve,” counted Lavinia, with Helen on her arm.

“Don’t you feel funny?” asked Helen.

“How do you mean?”

“When you think of us being out here on the sidewalks, under the trees, and all those people safe behind locked doors, lying in their beds. We’re practically the only walking people out in the open in a thousand miles, I bet.”

The sound of the deep warm dark ravine came near.

In a minute they stood before Helen’s house, looking at each other for a long time. The wind blew the odor of cut grass between them. The moon was sinking in a sky that was beginning to cloud. “I don’t suppose it’s any use asking you to stay, Lavinia?”

“I’ll be going on.”

“Sometimes—”

“Sometimes what?”

“Sometimes I think people want to die. You’ve acted odd all evening.”

“I’m just not afraid,” said Lavinia. “And I’m curious, I suppose. And I’m using my head. Logically, the Lonely One can’t be around. The police and all.”

“The police are home with their covers up over their ears.”

“Let’s just say I’m enjoying myself, precariously, but safely. If there was any real chance of anything happening to me, I’d stay here with you, you can be sure of that.”

“Maybe part of you doesn’t want to live anymore.”

“You and Francine. Honestly!”

“I feel so guilty. I’ll be drinking some hot cocoa just as you reach the ravine bottom and walk on the bridge.”

“Drink a cup for me. Good night.”

Lavinia Nebbs walked alone down the midnight street, down the late summer-night silence. She saw houses with the dark windows and far away she heard a dog barking. In five minutes, she thought, I’ll be safe at home. In five minutes I’ll be phoning silly little Francine. I’ll—”

She heard the man’s voice.

A man’s voice singing far away among the trees.

“Oh, give me a June night, the moonlight and you . . .”

She walked a little faster.

The voice sang, “In my arms . . . with all your charms . . .”

Down the street in the dim moonlight a man walked slowly and casually along.

I can run knock on one of these doors, thought Lavinia, if I must.

“Oh, give me a June night,” sang the man, and he carried a long club in his hand. “The moonlight and you. Well, look who’s here! What a time of night for you to be out, Miss Nebbs!”

“Officer Kennedy!”

And that’s who it was, of course.

“I’d better see you home!”

“Thanks, I’ll make it.”

“But you live across the ravine. . . .”

Yes, she thought, but I won’t walk through the ravine with any man, not even an officer. How do I know who the Lonely One is? “No,” she said, “I’ll hurry.”

“I’ll wait right here,” he said. “If you need any help, give a yell. Voices carry good here. I’ll come running.”

“Thank you.”

She went on, leaving him under a light, humming to himself, alone. Here I am, she thought.

The ravine.

She stood on the edge of the one hundred and thirteen steps that went down the steep hill and then across the bridge seventy yards and up the hills leading to Park Street. And only one lantern to see by. Three minutes from now, she thought, I'll be putting my key in my house door. Nothing can happen in just one hundred eighty seconds.

She started down the long dark-green steps into the deep ravine.

“One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten steps,” she counted in a whisper.

She felt she was running, but she was not running.

“Fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, twenty steps,” she breathed.

“One fifth of the way!” she announced to herself.

The ravine was deep, black and black, black! And the world was gone behind, the world of safe people in bed, the locked doors, the town, the drugstore, the theater, the lights, everything was gone. Only the ravine existed and lived, black and huge, about her.

“Nothing's happened, has it? No one around, is there? Twenty-four, twenty-five steps. Remember that old ghost story you told each other when you were children?”

She listened to her shoes on the steps.

“The story about the dark man coming in your house and you upstairs in bed. And now he's at the first step coming up to your room. And now he's at the second step. And now he's at the third step and the fourth step and the fifth! Oh, how you used to laugh and scream at that story! And now the horrid dark man's at the twelfth step and now he's



opening the door of your room and now he's standing by your bed. 'I GOT YOU!'"

She screamed. It was like nothing she'd ever heard, that scream. She had never screamed that loud in her life. She stopped, she froze, she clung to the wooden banister. Her heart exploded in her. The sound of the terrified beating filled the universe.

"There, there!" she screamed to herself. "At the bottom of the steps. A man, under the light! No, now he's gone! He was waiting there!"

She listened.

Silence.

The bridge was empty.

Nothing, she thought, holding her heart. Nothing. Fool! That story I told myself. How silly. What shall I do?

Her heartbeats faded.

Shall I call the officer—did he hear me scream?

She listened. Nothing. Nothing.

I'll go the rest of the way. That silly story.

She began again, counting the steps.

"Thirty-five, thirty-six, careful, don't fall. Oh, I am a fool. Thirty-seven steps, thirty-eight, nine and forty, and two makes forty-two—almost halfway."

She froze again.

Wait, she told herself.

She took a step. There was an echo.

She took another step.

Another echo. Another step, just a fraction of a moment later.

"Someone's following me," she whispered to the ravine, to the black crickets and dark-green hidden frogs and the black stream. "Someone's on the steps behind me. I don't dare turn around."

Another step, another echo.

“Every time I take a step, they take one.”

A step and an echo.

Weakly she asked of the ravine, “Officer Kennedy, is that you?”

The crickets were still.

The crickets were listening. The night was listening to her. For a change, all of the far summer-night meadows and close summer-night trees were suspending motion; leaf, shrub, star, and meadow grass ceased their particular tremors and were listening to Lavinia Nebbs’s heart.

And perhaps a thousand miles away, across locomotive-lonely country, in an empty way station, a single traveler reading a dim newspaper under a solitary naked bulb, might raise up his head, listen, and think, What’s that? and decide, Only a woodchuck, surely, beating on a hollow log. But it was Lavinia Nebbs, it was most surely the heart of Lavinia Nebbs.

Silence. A summer-night silence which lay for a thousand miles, which covered the earth like a white and shadowy sea.

Faster, faster! She went down the steps.

Run!

She heard music. In a mad way, in a silly way, she heard the great surge of music that pounded at her, and she realized as she ran, as she ran in panic and terror, that some part of her mind was dramatizing, borrowing from the turbulent musical score of some private drama, and the music was rushing and pushing her now, higher and higher, faster, faster, plummeting and scurrying, down, and down into the pit of the ravine.

Only a little way, she prayed. One hundred eight, nine, one hundred ten steps! The bottom! Now, run! Across the bridge!

She told her legs what to do, her arms, her body, her terror; she advised all parts of herself in this white and terrible moment, over the roaring creek waters, on the hollow, thudding, swaying almost alive,

resilient bridge planks she ran, followed by the wild footsteps behind, behind, with the music following, too, the music shrieking and babbling.

He's following, don't turn, don't look, if you see him, you'll not be able to move, you'll be so frightened. Just run, run!

She ran across the bridge.

Oh, God, God, please, please let me get up the hill! Now up the path, now between the hills, oh God, it's dark, and everything so far away. If I screamed now it wouldn't help; I can't scream anyway. Here's the top of the path, here's the street, oh, God, please let me be safe, if I get home safe I'll never go out alone; I was a fool, let me admit it, I was a fool, I didn't know what terror was, but if you let me get home from this I'll never go without Helen or Francine again! Here's the street. Across the street!

She crossed the street and rushed up the sidewalk.

Oh God, the porch! My house! Oh God, please give me time to get inside and lock the door and I'll be safe!

And there—silly thing to notice—why did she notice, instantly, no time, no time—but there it was anyway, flashing by—there on the porch rail, the half-filled glass of lemonade she had abandoned a long time, a year, half an evening ago! The lemonade glass sitting calmly, imperturbably there on the rail . . . and . . .

She heard her clumsy feet on the porch and listened and felt her hands scabbling and ripping at the lock with the key. She heard her heart.

She heard her inner voice screaming.

The key fit.

Unlock the door, quick, quick!

The door opened.

Now, inside. Slam it!

She slammed the door.

"Now lock it, bar it, lock it!" she gasped wretchedly.

"Lock it, tight, tight!"

The door was locked and bolted tight.

The music stopped. She listened to her heart again and the sound of it diminishing into silence.

Home! Oh God, safe at home! Safe, safe and safe at home! She slumped against the door. Safe, safe. Listen. Not a sound. Safe, safe, oh thank God, safe at home. I'll never go out at night again. I'll stay home. I won't go over that ravine again ever. Safe, oh safe, safe home, so good, so good, safe! Safe inside, the door locked. Wait.

Look out the window.  
She looked.

Why, there's no one there at all! Nobody. There was nobody following me at all. Nobody running after me. She got her breath and almost laughed at herself. It stands to reason If a man had been following me, he'd have caught me! I'm not a fast runner. . . . There's no one on the porch or in the yard. How silly of me. I wasn't running from anything. That ravine's as safe as anyplace. Just the same, it's nice to be home. Home's the really good warm place, the only place to be.

She put her hand out to the light switch and stopped.  
"What?" she asked. "What, what?"  
Behind her in the living room, someone cleared his throat.

The End