



Exorcism, Ray Bradbury

Exorcism

She came out of the bathroom putting iodine on her finger where she had almost lopped it off cutting herself a chunk of coconut cake.

Just then the mailman came up the porch steps, opened the door, and walked in. The door slammed. Elmira Brown jumped a foot.

‘Sam!’ she cried. She waved her iodined finger on the air to cool it. ‘I’m still not used to my husband being a postman. Every time you just walk in, it scares the life out of me!’

Sam Brown stood there with the mail pouch half empty, scratching his head. He looked back out the door as if a fog had suddenly rolled in on a calm sweet summer morn.

‘Sam, you’re home early,’ she said.

‘Can’t stay,’ he said in a puzzled voice.

‘Spit it out, what’s wrong?’ She came over and looked into his face.

‘Maybe nothing, maybe lots. I just delivered some mail to Clara Goodwater up the street...’

‘Clara Goodwater!’

‘Now don’t get your dander up. Books it was, from the Johnson-Smith Company, Racine, Wisconsin. Title of one book...let’s see now.’ He screwed up his face, then unscrewed it. ‘Albertus Magnus—that’s it.

“Being the approved, verified, sympathetic and natural Egyptian Secrets or...” He peered at the ceiling to summon the lettering. ““White and Black Art for Man and Beast, Revealing the Forbidden Knowledge and Mysteries of Ancient Philosophers”!”

‘Clara Goodwater’s you say?’

‘Walking along, I had a good chance to peek at the front pages, no harm in that. “Hidden Secrets of Life Unveiled by that celebrated Student, Philosopher, Chemist, Naturalist, Psychomist, Astrologer, Alchemist, Metallurgist, Sorcerer.

Explinator of the Mysteries of Wizards and Witchcraft, together with recondite views of numerous Arts and Sciences—Obscure, Plain, Practical, etcetera.” There! By God, I got a head like a box Brownie. Got the words, even if I haven’t got the sense.’

Elmira stood looking at her iodined finger as if it were pointed at her by a stranger.

‘Clara Goodwater,’ she murmured.

‘Looked me right in the eye as I handed it over, said. “Going to be a witch, first-class, no doubt. Get my diploma in no time. Set up business. Hex crowds and individuals, old and young, big and small.” Then she kinda laughed, put her nose in that book, and went in.’

Elmira stared at a bruise on her arm, carefully tongued a loose tooth in her jaw.

A door slammed. Tom Spaulding, kneeling on Elmira Brown’s front lawn, looked up. He had been wandering about the neighborhood, seeing how the ants were doing here or there, and had found a particularly good hill with a big hole in which all kinds of fiery bright pismires were tumbling about scissoring the air and wildly carrying little packets of dead grasshopper and infinitesimal bird down into the earth.

Now here was something else: Mrs Brown, swaying on the edge of her porch as if she’d just found out the world was falling through space at sixty trillion miles a second. Behind her was Mr Brown, who didn’t know the miles per second and probably wouldn’t care if he did know.

‘You, Tom!’ said Mrs Brown. ‘I need moral support and the equivalent of the blood of the Lamb with me. Come along!’

And off she rushed, squashing ants and kicking tops off dandelions and trotting big spiky holes in flower beds as she cut across yards.

Tom knelt a moment longer studying Mrs Brown's shoulder blades and spine as she toppled down the street. He read the bones and they were eloquent of melodrama and adventure, a thing he did not ordinarily connect with ladies, even though Mrs Brown had the remnants of a pirate's mustache. A moment later he was in tandem with her.

'Mrs Brown, you sure look mad!'

'You don't know what mad is, boy!'

'Watch out!' cried Tom.

Mrs Elmira Brown fell right over an iron dog lying asleep there on the green grass.

'Mrs Brown!'

'You see?' Mrs Brown sat there. 'Clara Goodwater did this to me! Magic!'

'Magic?'

'Never mind, boy. Here's the steps. You go first and kick any invisible strings out of the way. Ring that doorbell, but pull your finger off quick, the juice'll burn you to a cinder!'

Tom did not touch the bell.

'Clara Goodwater!' Mrs Brown flicked the bell button with her iodined finger.

Far away in the cool dim empty rooms of the big old house, a silver bell tinkled and faded.

Tom listened. Still farther away there was a stir of mouselike running. A shadow, perhaps a blowing curtain, moved in a distant parlor.

'Hello,' said a quiet voice.

And quite suddenly Mrs Goodwater was there, fresh as a stick of peppermint, behind the screen.

‘Why, hello there, Tom, Elmira. What—’

‘Don’t rush me! We came over about your practicing to be a full-fledged witch!’

Mrs Goodwater smiled. ‘Your husband’s not only a mailman, but a guardian of the law. Got a nose out to here!’

‘He didn’t look at no mail.’

‘He’s ten minutes between houses laughing at post cards and trying on mail-order shoes.’

‘It ain’t what he seen; it’s what you yourself told him about the books you got.’

‘Just a joke. “Going to be a witch!” I said, and bang! Off gallops Sam, like I’d flung lightning at him. I declare there can’t be one wrinkle in that man’s brain.’

‘You talked about your magic other places yesterday—’

‘You must mean the Sandwich Club...’

‘To which I pointedly was not invited.’

‘Why, lady, we thought that was your regular day with your grandma.’

‘I can always have another Grandma day, if people’d only ask me places.’

‘All there was to it at the Sandwich Club was me sitting there with a ham and pickle sandwich, and I said right out loud, “At last I’m going to get my witch’s diploma. Been studying for years!”’

‘That’s what come back to me over the phone!’

‘Ain’t modern inventions wonderful!’ said Mrs Goodwater.

‘Considering you been president of the Honeysuckle Ladies Lodge since the Civil War, it seems, I’ll put it to you bang on the nose. Have you

used witchcraft all these years to spell the ladies and win the ayes-have-it?’

‘Do you doubt it for a moment, lady?’ said Mrs Goodwater.

‘Election’s tomorrow again, and all I want to know is, you running for another term—and ain’t you ashamed?’

‘Yes to the first question and no to the second. Lady, look here, I bought those books for my boy cousin, Raoul. He’s just ten and goes around looking in hats for rabbits. I told him there’s about as much chance finding rabbits in hats as brains in heads of certain people I could name, but look he does and so I got these gifts for him.’

‘Wouldn’t believe you on a stack of Bibles.’

‘God’s truth, anyway. I love to fun about the witch thing. The ladies all yodeled when I explained about my dark powers. Wish you’d been there.’

‘I’ll be there tomorrow to fight you with a cross of gold and all the powers of good I can organize behind me,’ said Elmira. ‘Right now, tell me how much other magic junk you got in your house.’

Mrs Goodwater pointed to a sidetable inside the door.

‘I been buying all kinds of magic herbs. Smell funny and make Raoul happy. That little sack of stuff, that’s called thisis rue, and this is sabisse root and that there’s ebon herbs; here’s black sulphur, and this they claim is bone dust.’

‘Bone dust!’ Elmira skipped back and kicked Tom’s ankle. Tom yelped.

‘And here’s wormwood and fern leaves so you can freeze shotguns and fly like a bat in your dreams, it says in Chapter X of the little book here. I think it’s fine for growing boys’ heads to think about things like this.

Now, from the look on your face you don't believe Raoul exists. Well, I'll give you his Springfield address.'

'Yes,' said Elmira, 'and the day I write him you'll take the Springfield bus and go to General Delivery and get my letter and write back to me in a boy's hand. I know you!'

'Mrs Brown, speak up—you want to be president of the Honeysuckle Ladies Lodge, right? You run every year now for ten years. You nominate yourself. And always wind up getting one vote.

Yours. Elmira, if the ladies wanted you they'd landslide you in. But from where I stand looking up the mountain, ain't so much as one pebble come rattling down save yours. Tell you what, I'll nominate and vote for you myself come noon tomorrow, how's that?'

'Damned for sure, then,' said Elmira. 'Last year I got a deathly cold right at election time; couldn't get out and campaign back-fence-to-backfence. Year before that, broke my leg. Mighty strange.' She squinted darkly at the lady behind the screen. 'That's not all.

Last month I cut my fingers six times, bruised my knee ten times, fell off my back porch twice, you hear—twice! I broke a window, dropped four dishes, one vase worth a dollar forty-nine at Bixby's, and I'm billing you for every dropped dish from now on in my house and environs!'

'I'll be poor by Christmas,' said Mrs Goodwater. She opened the screen door and came out suddenly and let the door slam. 'Elmira Brown, how old are you?'

'You probably got it written in one of your black books. Thirty-five!'

'Well, when I think of thirty-five years of your life...' Mrs Goodwater pursed her lips and blinked her eyes, counting. 'That's about twelve thousand seven hundred and seventy-five days, or counting three of them per day, twelve thousand-odd commotions, twelve thousand much-ados and twelve thousand calamities. It's a full rich life you lead, Elmira Brown. Shake hands!'

‘Get away!’ Elmira fended her off.

‘Why, lady, you’re only the second most clumsy woman in Green Town, Illinois. You can’t sit down without playing the chair like an accordion. You can’t stand up but what you kick the cat. You can’t trot across an open meadow without falling into a well. Your life has been one long decline, Elmira Alice Brown, so why not admit it?’

‘It wasn’t clumsiness that caused my calamities, but you being within a mile of me at those times when I dropped a pot of beans or juiced my finger in the electric socket at home.’

‘Lady, in a town this size, everybody’s within a mile of someone at one time or other in the day.’

‘You admit being around then?’

‘I admit being born here, yes, but I’d give anything right now to have been born in Kenosha or Zion. Elmira, go to your dentist and see what he can do about that serpent’s tongue in there.’

‘Oh!’ said Elmira. ‘Oh, oh, oh!’

‘You’ve pushed me too far, I wasn’t interested in witchcraft, but I think I’ll just look into this business. Listen here! You’re invisible right now. While you stood there I put a spell on you. You’re clean out of sight.’

‘You didn’t!’

‘Course,’ admitted the witch, ‘I never could see you, lady.’

Elmira pulled out her pocket mirror. ‘There I am!’ She peered closer and gasped. She reached up like someone tuning a harp and plucked a single thread. She held it up, Exhibit A. ‘I never had a gray hair in my life till this second!’

The witch smiled charmingly. ‘Put it in a jar of still water, be an angleworm come morning. Oh, Elmira, look at yourself at last, won’t

you? All these years, blaming others for your own mallet feet and floaty ways! You ever read Shakespeare?

There's little stage directions in there: Alarums and Excursions. That's you, Elmira. Alarums and Excursions! Now get home before I feel the bumps on your head and predict gas at night for you! Shoo!

She waved her hands in the air as if Elmira were a cloud of things. 'My, the flies are thick this summer!' she said.

She went inside and hooked the door.

'The line is drawn, Mrs Goodwater,' Elmira said, folding her arms. 'I'll give you one last chance. Withdraw from the candidacy of the Honeysuckle Lodge or face me face-to-face tomorrow when I run for office and wrest it from you in a fair fight. I'll bring Tom here with me. An innocent good boy. And innocence and good will win the day.'

'I wouldn't count on me being innocent, Mrs Brown,' said the boy. 'My mother says—'

'Shut up, Tom, good's good! You'll be there on my right hand, boy.'

'Yes'm,' said Tom.

'If, that is,' said Elmira, 'I can live through the night with this lady making wax dummies of me—shoving rusty needles through the very heart and soul of them. If you find a great big fig in my bed all shriveled up come sunrise, Tom, you'll know who picked the fruit in the vineyard. And look to see Mrs Goodwater president till she's a hundred and ninetyfive years old.'

'Why, lady,' said Mrs Goodwater, 'I'm three hundred and five now. Used to call me SHE in the old days.' She poked her fingers at the street. 'Abracadabra-zimmity-ZAM! How's that?'

Elmira ran down off the porch.

'Tomorrow!' she cried.

'Till then, lady!' said Mrs Goodwater.

Tom followed Elmira, shrugging and kicking ants off the sidewalk as he went.

Running across a driveway, Elmira screamed.

'Mrs Brown!' cried Tom.

A car backing out of a garage ran right over Elmira's right big toe.

Mrs Elmira Brown's foot hurt her in the middle of the night, so she got up and went down to the kitchen and ate some cold chicken and made a neat, painfully accurate list of things. First, illnesses in the past year.

Three colds, four mild attacks of indigestion, one seizure of bloat, arthritis, lumbago, what she imagined to be gout, a severe bronchial cough, incipient asthma, and spots on her arms, plus an abscessed semicircular canal which made her reel like a drunken moth some days, backache, head pains, and nausea. Cost of medicine: ninety-eight dollars and seventy-eight cents.

Secondly, things broken in the house during the twelve months just past: two lamps, six vases, ten dishes, one soup tureen, two windows, one chair, one sofa cushion, six glasses, and one crystal chandelier prism. Total cost: twelve dollars and ten cents.

Thirdly, her pains this very night. Her toe hurt from being run over. Her stomach was upset. Her back was stiff, her legs were pulsing with agony. Her eyeballs felt like wads of blazing cotton. Her tongue tasted like a dust mop. Her ears were belling and ringing away. Cost? She debated, going back to bed.

Ten thousand dollars in personal suffering.

'Try to settle this out of court!' she said half aloud.

'Eh?' said her husband, awake.

She lay down in bed. 'I simply refuse to die.'

'Beg pardon?' he said.

'I won't die!' she said, staring at the ceiling.

'That's what I always claimed,' said her husband, and turned over to snore.

In the morning. Mrs Elmira Brown was up early and down to the library and then to the drugstore and back to the house where she was busy mixing all kinds of chemicals when her husband, Sam, came home with an empty mail pouch at noon.

'Lunch's in the icebox.' Elmira stirred a green-looking porridge in a large glass.

'Good Lord, what's that?' asked her husband. 'Looks like a milk shake been left out in the sun for forty years. Got kind of a fungus on it.'

'Fight magic with magic.'

'You goin' to drink that?'

'Just before I go up into the Honeysuckle Ladies Lodge for the big doings.'

Samuel Brown sniffed the concoction. 'Take my advice. Get up those steps first, then drink it. What's in it?'

'Snow from angels' wings, well, really menthol, to cool hell's fires that burn you, it says in this book I got at the library. The juice of a fresh grape off the vine, for thinking clear sweet thoughts in the face of dark visions, it says.

Also red rhubarb, cream of tartar, white sugar, white of eggs, spring water and clover buds with the strength of the good earth in them. Oh, I could go on all day. It's here in the list, good against bad, white against black. I can't lose!

'Oh, you'll win, all right,' said her husband. 'But will you know it?'

'Think good thoughts. I'm on my way to get Tom for my charm.'

'Poor boy,' said her husband. 'Innocent, like you say, and about to be torn limb from limb, bargain-basement day at the Honeysuckle Lodge.'

'Tom'll survive,' said Elmira, and, taking the bubbling concoction with her, hid inside a Quaker Oats box with the lid on, went out the door without catching her dress or snagging her new ninety-eight-cent stockings. Realizing this, she was smug all the way to Tom's house where he waited for her in his white summer suit as she had instructed. 'Phew!' said Tom. 'What you got in that box?'

'Destiny,' said Elmira.

'I sure hope so,' said Tom, walking about two paces ahead of her.

The Honeysuckle Ladies Lodge was full of ladies looking in each other's mirrors and tugging at their skirts and asking to be sure their slips weren't showing.

At one o'clock Mrs Elmira Brown came up the steps with a boy in white clothes. He was holding his nose and screwing up one eye so he could only half see where he was going.

Mrs Brown looked at the crowd and then at the Quaker Oats box and opened the top and looked in and gasped, and put the top back on without drinking any of that stuff in there. She moved inside the hall and with her moved a rustling as of taffeta, all the ladies whispering in a tide after her.

She sat down in back with Tom, and Tom looked more miserable than ever. The one eye he had open looked at the crowd of ladies and shut up for good. Sitting there, Elmira got the potion out and drank it slowly down.

At one-thirty, the president, Mrs Goodwater, banged the gavel and all but two dozen of the ladies quit talking.

‘Ladies,’ she called out over the summer sea of silks and laces, capped here and there with white or gray, ‘it’s election time. But before we start, I believe Mrs Elmira Brown, wife of our eminent graphologist—’

A titter ran through the room.

‘What’s graphologist?’ Elmira elbowed Tom twice.

‘I don’t know,’ whispered Tom fiercely, eyes shut, feeling that elbow come out of darkness at him.

‘—wife, as I say, of our eminent handwriting expert, Samuel Brown...(more laughter)...of the U.S. Postal Service,’ continued Mrs Goodwater. ‘Mrs Brown wants to give us some opinions. Mrs Brown?’

Elmira stood up. Her chair fell over backward and snapped shut like a bear trap on itself. She jumped an inch off the floor and teetered on her heels, which gave off cracking sounds like they would fall to dust any moment.

‘I got plenty to say,’ she said, holding the empty Quaker Oats box in one hand with a Bible. She grabbed Tom with the other and plowed forward, hitting several people’s elbows and muttering to them. ‘Watch what you’re doing! Careful, you!’ to reach the platform, turn, and knock a glass of water dripping over the table.

She gave Mrs Goodwater another bristly scowl when this happened and let her mop it up with a tiny handkerchief. Then with a secret look of triumph, Elmira drew forth the empty philter glass and held it up, displaying it for Mrs Goodwater and whispering, ‘You know what was in this?’

‘It’s inside me, now, lady. The charmed circle surrounds me. No knife can cleave, no hatchet break through.’

The ladies, all talking, did not hear.

Mrs Goodwater nodded, held up her hands, and there was silence.

Elmira held tight to Tom's hand. Tom kept his eyes shut, wincing.

'Ladies,' Elmira said, 'I sympathize with you. I know what you've been through these last ten years. I know why you voted for Mrs Goodwater here. You've got boys, girls, and men to feed. You've got budgets to follow.

You couldn't afford to have your milk sour, your bread fall, or your cakes as flat as wheels. You didn't want mumps, chicken pox, and whooping cough in your house all in three weeks. You didn't want your husband crashing his car or electrocuting himself on the high-tension wires outside town.

But now all of that's over. You can come out in the open now. No more heartburns or backaches, because I've brought the good word and we're going to exorcise this witch we've got here!

Everybody looked around but didn't see any witch.

'I mean your president!' cried Elmira.

'Me!' Mrs Goodwater waved at everyone.

'Today,' breathed Elmira, holding on to the desk for support. 'I went to the library. I looked up counteractions. How to get rid of people who take advantage of others, how to make witches leave off and go.

And I found a way to fight for all our rights. I can feel the power growing. I got the magic of all kinds of good roots and chemicals in me. I got...' She paused and swayed. She blinked once. 'I got cream of tartar and...I got...white hawkweed and milk soured in the light of the moon and...' She stopped and thought for a moment.

She shut her mouth and a tiny sound came from deep inside her and worked up through to come out the corner of her lips. She closed her eyes for a moment to see where the strength was.

'Mrs Brown, you feelin' all right?' asked Mrs Goodwater.

'Feelin' fine!' said Mrs Brown slowly. 'I put in some pulverized carrots and parsley root, cut fine; juniper berry...'

Again she paused as if a voice had said STOP to her and she looked out across all those faces.

The room, she noticed, was beginning to turn slowly, first from left to right, then right to left.

'Rosemary roots and crowfoot flower...' she said rather dimly. She let go of Tom's hand. Tom opened one eye and looked at her.

'Bay leaves, nasturtium petals...' she said.

'Maybe you better sit down,' said Mrs Goodwater.

One lady at the side went and opened a window.

'Dry betel nuts, lavender and crab-apple seed,' said Mrs Brown and stopped. 'Quick now, let's have the election. Got to have the votes. I'll tabulate.'

'No hurry, Elmira,' said Mrs Goodwater.

'Yes, there is.' Elmira took a deep trembling breath. 'Remember, ladies, no more fear. Do like you always wanted to do. Vote for me, and...' The room was moving again, up and down. 'Honesty in government. All those in favor of Mrs Goodwater for president say "Aye."'

'Aye,' said the whole room.

'All those in favor of Mrs Elmira Brown?' said Elmira in a faint voice.

She swallowed.

After a moment she spoke, alone.

'Aye,' she said.

She stood stunned on the rostrum.

A silence filled the room from wall to wall. In that silence Mrs Elmira Brown made a croaking sound. She put her hand on her throat. She

turned and looked dimly at Mrs Goodwater, who now very casually drew forth from her purse a small wax doll in which were a number of rusted thumbtacks.

'Tom,' said Elmira, 'show me the way to the ladies' room.'

'Yes'm.'

They began to walk and then hurry and then run. Elmira ran on ahead, through the crowd, down the aisle...She reached the door and started left.

'No, Elmira, right, right!' cried Mrs Goodwater.

Elmira turned left and vanished.

There was a noise like coal down a chute.

'Elmira!'

The ladies ran around like a girls' basketball team, colliding with each other.

Only Mrs Goodwater made a straight line.

She found Tom looking down the stairwell, his hands clenched to the banister.

'Forty steps!' he moaned. 'Forty steps to the ground!'

Later on and for months and years after it was told how like an inebriate Elmira Brown negotiated those steps touching every one on her long way down. It was claimed that when she began the fall she was sick to unconsciousness and that this made her skeleton rubber, so she kind of rolled rather than ricocheted.

She landed at the bottom, blinking and feeling better, having left whatever it was that had made her uneasy all along the way. True, she was so badly bruised she looked like a tattooed lady.

But, no, not a wrist was sprained or an ankle twisted. She held her head funny for three days, kind of peering out of the sides of her eyeballs

instead of turning to look. But the important thing was Mrs Goodwater at the bottom of the steps, pillowing Elmira's head on her lap and dropping tears on her as the ladies gathered hysterically.

'Elmira, I promise, Elmira. I swear, if you just live, if you don't die, you hear me, Elmira, listen! I'll use my magic for nothing but good from now on. No more black, nothing but white magic. The rest of your life, if I have my way, no more falling over iron dogs, tripping on sills, cutting fingers, or dropping downstairs for you!

Elysium, Elmira, Elysium. I promise! If you just live! Look. I'm pulling the tacks out of the doll! Elmira, speak to me! Speak now and sit up! And come upstairs for another vote. President, I promise, president of the Honeysuckle Ladies Lodge, by acclamation, won't we, ladies?'

At this all the ladies cried so hard they had to lean on each other.

Tom, upstairs, thought this meant death down there.

He was halfway down when he met the ladies coming back up, looking like they had just wandered out of a dynamite explosion.

'Get out of the way, boy!'

First came Mrs Goodwater, laughing and crying.

Next came Mrs Elmira Brown, doing the same.

And after the two of them came all the one hundred twenty-three members of the lodge, not knowing if they'd just returned from a funeral or were on their way to a ball.

He watched them pass and shook his head.

'Don't need me no more,' he said. 'No more at all.'

So he tiptoed down the stairs before they missed him, holding tight to the rail all the way.

The end