

# I Got Something You Ain't Got! Ray Bradbury

## I Got Something You Ain't Got!

AGGIE LOU COULD hardly wait through the morning until Clarisse stopped in the house on the way home from school to lunch. Clarisse was the braided ten-year-old girl who lived next door and there was considerable rivalry between them.

Aggie Lou folded her body half out of the sunshiny window and called, "Clarisse, come up!"

"Why weren't you in school?" cried Clarisse, perturbed that her life opponent should be bedded down and taking it easy away from the grim school life.

"Come up and find out!" replied Aggie Lou, flopping back into bed.

Clarisse came upstairs quickly, a strap of books pendulumming in one grubby fist.

Aggie Lou lay back, eyes closed, pleased with herself. "I got something you ain't got," she revealed.

"What?" asked Clarisse suspiciously.

"Maybe I'll tell, maybe I won't," said Aggie Lou, lazily.

"I gotta go home and eat," said Clarisse, not taken in by this strategy.

"Then you'll never know what I got," said Aggie Lou.

"Well, what is it?" shouted Clarisse, scowling.

"Bacteria," announced Aggie Lou proudly.

Clarisse's eyebrows went down. "What?"

"Bacteria. Microbes. Germs!"

"Oh, poo!" Clarisse swung her books carelessly. "Everybody's got germs. I got germs, too. Looky." She displayed ten fingers, equally begrubbed and the furthest state from antiseptic.

"That's on the outside," criticized Aggie Lou. "I got my germs on the inside, where it counts!"

Clarisse was finally impressed. "Inside?"

“They’re running around all over my machine, Dad says. Dad smiles funny when he says it. So does the doctor. They say I got them all over my lungs, having a regular picnic.”

Clarisse looked at her as if she were some black-braided saint glowing in holy repose upon crisp linen. “Lordy.”

“The doctor took some of my germs and put them under one of them seeing things and they ran around playing cops and robbers under his eyes. So there!”

Clarisse had to sit down. Her face was a little pale and flushed at the same time. It was easy to see that Aggie Lou’s triumph had made inroads upon her peace of mind. This particular triumph was much bigger than Clarisse’s Monarch butterfly which she had captured with a piggy squeal in her back yard last week and taunted Aggie Lou with. It was even the next size triumph over Clarisse’s party dress, which was all ruffles and pink roses and ribbons. It was a factor over and above Clarisse’s Uncle Peter who spat brown spit from a toothless mouth and had one wooden leg. Germs. Real germs, inside!

“So,” finished Aggie Lou, controlling her triumph with admirable calm, “I won’t go to school ever again. I won’t have to learn arithmetic or anything!”

Clarisse sat there, defeated.

“And that ain’t all,” said Aggie Lou, holding back the best thing for the last.

“What else?” demanded Clarisse harshly.

Aggie Lou looked about her bedroom quietly, settling back and worming into the blankets warm and nice. Then she said, “I’m going to die.”

Clarisse leaped from her chair, hair bouncing in blonde startlement.

“What?”

“Yes. I’m going to die.” Aggie Lou smiled gravely. “So there, Smarty!”

“Oh, Aggie Lou, you’re lying! You’re a dirty fibber!”

“I’m not either! You just ask Mama or Papa or Doctor Nielson! They’ll tell you! I’m going to die. And I’m going to have the nicest coffin ever. Dad said so. You should see Dad when he talks to me. Sometimes he comes in late at night and sits here, where you’re sitting, and holds my hand. I can’t see him very well, except his eyes. They’re funny. He says lots of things. He says I’ll have a coffin plated with gold, and satin inside, a regular doll house.

He says I’ll have dolls to play with. He says he’s buying me some land of my own for my doll house where I can play all by myself, Smarty. It’ll be on a hill where I can own the whole world just by looking at it, Dad said it, too. And, and, and I’ll just play with my dolls and look pretty. I’m going to have a green party dress like yours, and a Monarch butterfly, and better than your Uncle Peter I’ll have SAINT Peter for myself!”

Clarisse’s face was tense with keeping back the jealous rage in her. Tears stood bold on her cheeks, and she rose undecided from her perch to stare at Aggie Lou.

Then, screaming fitfully, she plunged from the room, ran down the stairs, and out into the spring day, and across the green lawn to her house, sobbing all the way.

Clarisse slammed the door in upon herself and the kitchen cooking odors. Clarisse’s mother was dissecting apples into a crust-lined tin and she declaimed against the door slamming.

“Oh, I don’t care!” snuffled the little girl, sliding her pink bloomed bottom upon the built-in table bench. “That old Aggie Lou next door!”

Clarisse’s mother looked up. “Have you two been at it again? How many times have I told you?—”

“Well, she’s going to die, and she sits there in bed smiling at me, smiling at me. Gee!”

The mother dropped her knife. “Will you say that again, young lady?”

“She’s going to die, and she sits there laughing at me! Oh, mother, what’ll I do?”

“What’ll you do? About it? Or what?” Bewilderment. The mother had to sit down, her fingers were jumping up and down on her apron.

“I’ve got to stop her, Mother! She can’t get away with it!”

“That’s awfully nice of you, Clarisse, being so thoughtful.”

“I’m not being nice, Mama. I hate her, I hate her, I hate her.”

“But I don’t understand. If you hate her, why are you trying to help her?”

“I don’t want to help her!”

“But you just said—”

“Oh, Mama, you don’t help!” She cried bitterly and bit her lips.

“Honestly, you children. It’s so hard to figure you out. Do you or don’t you want to do something about Aggie Lou?”

“I do! I’ve got to stop her! She can’t do it. She’s so stuck up about her—germs!” Clarisse pounded the table top. “She keeps singing ‘I got something you ain’t got!’”

Her mother exhaled. “Oh, I think I’m beginning to see.”

“Mother, can I die? Let me die first. Let me get even with her, don’t let her do this!”

“Clarisse!” A heart whirled like the egg-beater beneath the calico apron. “Don’t you ever talk like that again! You don’t know what you’re saying! My land, oh, my land!”

“Why can’t I talk like this? I guess I can talk if Aggie Lou can.”

“Well, you don’t know anything about death, in the first place. It’s not like what you think it is.”

“What is it like?”

“Well, it’s—it’s—well. Goodness, Clarisse, what a silly question. There’s—nothing wrong with it. It’s quite natural really. Yes, it’s quite natural.”

Her mother felt herself caught between two philosophies. The philosophy of children, so unknowing, so one-dimensional, and her own full-blown beliefs which were too raw, dark and all-consuming to descend upon the sweet little ginghamed things who skirted through their ten year era with soprano laughter. It was a delicate subject. And,

as with many mothers, she did not take the realist's way out, she simply built upon the fantasy.

Heaven knows it was easier to look on the bright side, and what little girls don't know can't hurt them. So she simply told Clarisse what Clarisse didn't want to hear. She told her, "Death is a long sweet sleep, with maybe different kinds of nice dreams. That's all it is."

Therefore she was dismayed when Clarisse broke into a new storm of rebellion. "That's the trouble! I'll never be able to talk to kids at school, after this. Aggie Lou'll laugh at me!"

The mother suddenly got up. "Go up to your room, Clarisse, and don't bother me. You can ask questions later, but for heavens sake leave me alone to think now! If Aggie Lou's going to die, I have to see her mother right away!"

"Will you do something to stop Aggie Lou from dying?"

The mother looked down into the child's face. There was no compassion or understanding there, just the bright ignorance and primitive jealousy and emotion of a child wanting something and not understanding what degree of something it wants.

"Yes," said the mother strangely. "We'll try to stop Aggie Lou from dying."

"Oh, thank you, Mother!" cried Clarisse in triumph. "I guess we'll show her!"

The mother smiled weakly, vaguely, closing her eyes. "Yes, I guess we will!"

MRS. SHEPHERD knocked at the back of the Partridge house. Mrs. Partridge answered. "Oh, hello, Helen."

Mrs. Shepherd murmured something and stepped into the kitchen, thinking to herself. Then when she was seated in the kitchen eating nook she looked up at Mrs. Partridge and said, "I didn't know about Aggie Lou."

The carefully assembled smile on Mrs. Partridge's face fell apart. She sat down, too, slowly. "I don't like to talk about it."

"No, of course you don't, but I've been wondering..."

"About what?"

"It seems silly. But somehow I think we've raised our children wrong. I think we've told them the wrong things, or else we haven't told them enough."

"I don't see what you mean," said Mrs. Partridge.

"It's just that Clarisse is jealous of Aggie Lou."

"But that seems so strange. Why should she be jealous?"

"You know how children are. Sometimes one of them gets something, something neither good nor bad nor worth wanting, and they build it into something shining and wonderful so all other children are jealous. Children have the most inexplicable methods of obtaining their ends. They promote jealousy with the most peculiar weapons, even Death. Clarisse doesn't really want—want to be sick. She just—well—she just thinks she does. She doesn't really know what Death is. She hasn't been touched by it. Our family has been lucky. Her grandparents and cousins and uncles and aunts are all alive. There hasn't been a death among us in twenty years at least."

Mrs. Partridge drew into herself, and turned over Aggie Lou's life as if it were a doll to be examined. "We've fed Aggie Lou on pretty dreams, too. She's so young, and now with the illness, well, we thought we would make it easier for her if anything should happen.

"Yes, but don't you see that it's causing complications."

"It's making my daughter's life bearable. I don't know how she'd go on otherwise," said Mrs. Partridge.

Mrs. Shepherd said, "Well, I'm going to tell my daughter tonight that it's all nonsense, that she's not to believe one more word of it."

"But how thoughtless," came back Mrs. Partridge. "She would only rush over and tell Aggie Lou, and Aggie Lou would—well—it just wouldn't be right. You see?"

"But Clarisse is unhappy."

“She has her health, at least. She can bear being unhappy awhile. Poor Aggie Lou, she deserves what little joy she can find.”

Mrs. Partridge had a good point and stuck to it. Mrs. Shepherd had to agree that it might be wise to let it go a while longer, “Except that Clarisse is so disturbed.”

IN THE next few days from her window Aggie Lou saw Clarisse all dressed up and going down the street and when she called to ask over the distance where Clarisse was going, Clarisse pivoted and with a shining white look, which was alien to her face, replied that she was going to church to pray for Aggie Lou to get well.

“Clarisse, you come back here, come back!” shouted Aggie Lou.

“Why, Aggie Lou,” said her parents to her, “how can you be so cross towards Clarisse, she’s so considerate, bothering to go all the way to church that way.”

Aggie Lou thumped over in bed, muttering into the pillow.

And when the new doctor appeared, Aggie Lou stared at him and his silver hypodermic and said, “Where’d he come from?”

The doctor, it turned out, was a cousin of Mr. Partridge’s who had experimented with some new injections which he promptly gave to Aggie Lou with a smile and only a little prickling pain to her arm.

“I suppose Clarisse had something to do with this?” asked Aggie Lou.

“Yes, she kept talking to her father and her father finally telegraphed the doctor.”

Aggie Lou rubbed her injection mark fiercely and said, “I knew it, I knew it!”

At night, in the cool darkness, Aggie kneeled upon her bed and looked at the ceiling. “God, if you’re listening to Clarisse, don’t any more. She spoils everything. After all, it’s up to me, isn’t it, to ask for what happens to me? Yes. Then, don’t pay no attention to Clarisse, she’s mean. Thank you, God.”

Late that night she tried her very hardest to die. She gritted her teeth and sweat rolled down and tasted of salt in her mouth. She clenched her fists and held them taut at her sides and stretched her body like a steel spring. Inside, she tried to catch the beat of her heart, using her ribs and lungs as hands to clutch it with and stop it, as you stop a clock in the night when its ticking keeps you awake.

Finally, too warm, she threw back the covers and lay moist and panting. Much later she went and stood by the window and looked over at the other house where the lights burned until dawn. She practiced lying on the floor and dying.

And she practiced sitting in a chair and dying. She tried it in many postures, but nothing happened, her heart ticked merrily on. At other times Clarisse would come stand under her window. "I'm going to jump in the river," she said, tauntingly. Or, "I'm going to eat until I bust."

"Shut up!" Aggie Lou would reply.

Clarisse would bounce her red ball and pass her little curve of leg over over over it, one two three four, over over. And while doing it she would sing, "Gonna jump in the river, gonna leap off a hotel, gonna eat till I bah-ust, gonna jump in the rih-ver." Bounce, bounce, bounce rubber.

Slam, would go Aggie Lou's windows!

Aggie Lou scowled in bed. Supposing Clarisse did what she said? It would be spoiled. There would be no use dying then. Aggie Lou hated to be second comer for anything. She always wanted something her very own. Clarisse had just better not try anything!

Then, the insidious thing began to take place. Aggie Lou started feeling better. The yellow sun looked bright, hot. The birds sang sweetly. She smelled the air like spring wine. But she was afraid to tell mother because mother would tell Clarisse and Clarisse would go ha ha oh ha ha, haha oh haha and yahhh for you! Aggie Lou realized, like a flash



bulb going off, that she was getting well! Did the doctor know? Did mother guess? They mustn't. Not yet. No, not yet.

And she began to feel like running in the sun, over the lawns, she felt like hop scotching and climbing leafy trees, and lots of things. But she didn't dare say this. No, she pretended she was still sick and going to die. A weird thought came to her suddenly that she didn't really care about that silver house on the hill, or the dolls, or the dress, it was just so good not to feel tired.

But there was Clarisse to be faced, and what if she got well now and Clarisse teased her? My, she couldn't bear to think of it!

So next time Clarisse ran by like a pink robot on the grass, Aggie Lou yoohooed. "I'm going to die Thursday at three-fifteen. The doctor said so. He showed me a picture of my nice casket!" And a few minutes later Clarisse rushed out of her house, her coat and bonnet on, heading down toward church to see what she could do to circumvent this!

And as she returned at twilight, Aggie Lou leaned out and said in a faint and poignant whisper: "I'm feeling worse!" Clarisse stamped her foot.

THE NEXT morning a fly landed on the quilt. The fly walked around until Aggie Lou hit it. Then it lay quivering and then was silent. It didn't make a noise. It didn't buzz or twitch. When father came up bearing breakfast on a tray she pointed at the fly and asked a question.

Her father nodded. "Yes, it's dead." He gave it no importance, he seemed preoccupied with something else. It was, after all, just a fly. After breakfast, alone, she touched the fly and it did not protest. "You're dead," she said. "You're dead."

An hour of watching and waiting revealed something to her. "Why, he doesn't do anything. Just sits there."

“How silly,” she said, forty minutes later. “That’s no fun.”

And she looked over at Clarisse’s house and then lay back, closing her eyes, and, presently, she began to smile, contentedly.

HOW IT came about three days later that Clarisse had her accident, no one knew. It happened for sure. After three days of Aggie Lou poking out the window, advising Clarisse as to her coming death, Clarisse ran to play softball in the street Wednesday afternoon with some other girls who played way out in the distances behind the boy fielders. They were chasing long flies when the accident happened.

Homer Philipps smacked out a walloping three bagger and Clarisse ran to catch it and a car turned a sharp corner, and Clarisse was running along silently, when the car made her stop by hitting her.

Now, whether the car or Clarisse was to blame is one of those things you can talk about forever but never settle. Some say Clarisse didn’t look around—others say she did, but something compelled her to keep running.

The car lifted her like a leaf and tossed her. She tumbled and broke.

AGGIE LOU’S mother came into her room that night.

“Aggie Lou, I want to talk to you about Clarisse.”

“What about Clarisse?” asked Aggie Lou, breathlessly.

Two months later, Aggie Lou walked up to the cemetery hill and listened to Clarisse’s silence and not moving, and dropped some worms on the grave to help things along.

The end