

Miss Bidwell, Ray Bradbury

Miss Bidwell

OLD MISS BIDWELL used to sit with a lemonade glass in her hand in her squeaking rocker on the porch of her house on Saint James Street every summer night from seven until nine. At nine, you could hear the front door tap shut, the brass key turn in the lock, the shades rustle down, and the lights click out.

Her routine varied in no detail. She lived alone with a house full of rococo pictures, a dusty library, a yellow-mouthed piano, and a music box which, when she ratcheted it up and set it going, prickled the air like the bubbles from lemon soda pop.

Miss Bidwell had a nod for everyone walking by, and it was interesting that her house had no front steps leading up to its wooden porch. No front steps, and no back steps, for Miss Bidwell hadn't left her house in forty years. In the year 1909, she had had the back and the front steps completely torn down and the porches railed in.

In the autumn—the closing-up, the nailing-in, the hiding-away time—she would have one last lemonade on her cooling, bleak porch; then she would carry her wicker chair inside, and no one would see her again until the next spring.

“There she goes,” said Mr. Widmer, the grocer, pointing with the red apple in his hand. “Take a good look at her.” He tapped the wall calendar. “Nine o'clock of an evening in the month of September, the day after Labor Day.”

Several customers squinted over at Miss Bidwell's house. There was the old lady, looking around for a final time; then she went inside.

“Won't see her again until May first,” said Mr. Widmer. “There's a trap door in her kitchen wall. I unlock that trap door and shove the groceries

in. There's an envelope there, with money in it and a list of the things she wants. I never see her."

"What does she do all winter?"

"Only the Lord knows. She's had a phone for forty years and never used it."

Miss Bidwell's house was dark.

Mr. Widmer bit into his apple, enjoying its crisp succulence. "Forty years ago, she had the front steps taken away."

"Why? Folks die?"

"They died before that."

"Husband or children die?"

"Never had no husband nor children. She held hands with a young man who had all kinds of notions about travelling. They were going to be married. He used to sit and play the guitar and sing to her on that porch. One day he just went to the rail station and bought one ticket for Arizona, California, and China."

"That's a long time for a woman to carry a torch."

They laughed quietly and solemnly, for it was a sad admission they had made.

"Suppose she'll ever come out?"

"When you're seventy? All I do every year is wait for the first of May. If she don't come out on the porch that day and set up her chair, I'll know for sure she's dead. Then I'll phone the police.

"Goodnight," said everyone, and left Mr. Widmer alone in the gray light of his grocery shop.

Mr. Widmer put on his coat and listened to the whining of the wind grow stronger. Yes, every year. And every year at this time he'd watched the old woman become more of an old woman. She was as remote as one of those barometers where the woman comes out for fair weather, the man appears for bad.

But what a broken instrument, with only the woman coming out and coming out alone, and never a man at all, for bad or for better. How many thousands of July and August nights had he seen her there, beyond her moat of green grass, which was as impassable as a crocodile stream? Forty years of small-town nights. How much might they weigh if put to the scale? A feather to himself, but how much to her?

Mr. Widmer was putting on his hat when he saw the man.

The man came along the street, on the other side; an old man, dim in the light of the single corner street lamp. He was looking at all the house numbers, and when he came to the corner house, Number 11, he stopped and looked at the lightless windows.

“It couldn’t be,” said Mr. Widmer. He turned out the light and stood in the warm grocery smell of his store, watching the old man through the plate glass. “Not after this much time.” He shook his head. It was much more than ridiculous, for hadn’t he felt his heart quicken at least once a day, every day, for four decades whenever he saw a man pass or pause by Miss Bidwell’s? Every man in the history of the town who had so much as tied a shoelace in front of her locked house had been a source of wonder to Mr. Widmer.

“Are you the young man who ran off and left our Miss Bidwell?” he cried aloud, to himself.

Once, thirty years ago, white apron flapping, he had run across the brick street to confront a young man. “Well, so you came back!”

“What?” the young man said.

“Aren’t you Mr. Robert Farr, the one who brought her red carnations and played the guitar, and sang?”

“The name’s Corley,” and the young man drew forth silk samples to display and sell.

AS THE years passed, Mr. Widmer had become frightened about one thing: Suppose Mr. Farr did come back some day—how was he to be

recognized? In his mind Mr. Widmer remembered the man as striding and young and very clean-faced.

But forty years could peel a man away and dry his bones and tighten his flesh into a fine, acid etching. Perhaps some day Mr. Farr might return, like a hound dog to old trails, and, because of Mr. Widmer's negligence, think the house locked and buried deep in another century, and go on down the avenue, never the wiser. Perhaps it had happened already!

There stood the man, the old man, the unbelievable man, at nine-fifteen in the evening of the day after Labor Day in September. There was a slight bend to his knees and his back, and his face was turned to the Bidwell house.

"One last try," said Mr. Widmer. "Sticking my nose in."

He stepped lightly over the cool brick street and reached the farther curb. The old man turned toward him.

"Evening," said Mr. Widmer.

"I wonder if you could help me?" said the old man. "Is this the old Bidwell house?"

"Yes."

"Does anyone live there?"

"Miss Ann Bidwell, she's still there."

"Thank you."

"Goodnight." And Mr. Widmer walked off, his heart pounding, cursing himself. Why didn't you ask him, you idiot! Why didn't you say, Mr. Farr? Is that you Mr. Farr?

But he knew the answer. This time, he wanted it to be Mr. Farr. And the only way to insure that it was Mr. Farr was not to shatter the thin bubble of reality. Asking outright might have evoked an answer which would have crushed him all over again.

No, I'm not Mr. Farr; no, I'm not him. But this way, by not asking, Mr. Widmer could go to his home tonight, could lie in his upstairs bed, and, for an hour or so, could imagine, with an ancient and implausible tinge of romanticism, that at last the wandering man had come home from long track ways of travelling and long years of other cities and other worlds.

This sort of lie was the most pleasant in which to indulge. You don't ask a dream if it is real, or you wake up. All right then, let that man—bill collector, trash man, or whatever—for this night, at least, assume the identity of a lost person.

Mr. Widmer walked back across the street, around the side of his store, and up the narrow, dark stairs to the second floor where his wife was already in bed, asleep.

"Suppose it is him," he thought, in bed. "And he's knocking on the house sides, knocking on the back door with a broom handle, tapping at the windows, calling her on the phone, leaving his card poked under the doors—suppose?"

He turned on his side.

Will she answer? He wondered. Will she pay attention, will she do anything? Or will she just sit in her house with the fenced-in porch and no steps going up or down to the door, and let him knock and call her name?

He turned on his other side.

Will we see her again next May first, and not until then? And will he wait until then... six months of knocking and calling her name and waiting?

He got up and went to the window. There, far away over the green lawns, at the base of the huge, black house, by the porch which had no steps, stood the old man. And was it imagination or was his voice calling, calling there under the autumn trees, at the lightless windows?

THE NEXT morning, very early, Mr. Widmer looked down at Miss Bidwell's lawn.

It was empty. "I doubt if he was even there," said Mr. Widmer. "I doubt I even talked to anyone but a lamp-post. That apple was half cider; it turned my head."

It was seven o'clock. Mrs. Terle and Mrs. Adams came into the cold store for bacon and eggs and milk. Mr. Widmer edged around the subject. "Say, you didn't see no prowlers near Miss Bidwell's last night, did you?"

"Were there some?" cried the ladies.

"Thought I saw some."

"I didn't see no one," they said.

"It was the apple," murmured Mr. Widmer. "Pure cider."

The door slammed, and Mr. Widmer felt his spirits slump. Only he had seen, and the seeing must have been the rusted product of too many years of trying to live out another person's life.

The streets were empty, but the town was slowly arising to life. The sun was a reddish ball over the Court House Clock. Dew still lay on everything in a cool blanket. Dew stood in bubbles on every grass blade, on every silent red brick; dripped from the elms and the maples and the empty apple trees.

The dew.

He walked slowly and carefully across the empty street and stood on Miss Bidwell's sidewalk. Her lawns, a vast green sea of dew that had fallen in the night, lay before him. Mr. Widmer felt again the warm pounding of his heart. For there, in the dew, circling and circling the house, where they had left fine, clear impressions, was a series of endless footprints, around and around, under the windows, near the bushes, at the doors. Footprints in the crystal grass, footprints that melted as the sun rose.

The day was a slow day. Mr. Widmer kept near the front of his store, but saw nothing. At sunset, he sat smoking under the store awning. Maybe he's gone, maybe he'll never come back. She didn't answer. I know her. She's old and proud. The older, the prouder, that's what they say. Maybe he's gone off on the train again. Why didn't I ask his name? Why didn't I pound on the doors with him!

But the fact remained that he hadn't asked and he hadn't pounded, and he felt himself the nucleus of a tragedy that was beginning to grow far beyond him.

He won't come back. Not after all night walking around her house. He must have left just before dawn. Footsteps still fresh.

Eight o'clock. Eight-thirty. Nothing. Nine o'clock. Nine-thirty. Nothing. Mr. Widmer stayed open until quite late, even though there were no customers.

It was after eleven when he sat by the upstairs window of his home, not watching exactly, but not going to bed, either.

At eleven-thirty, the clock struck softly, and the old man came along the street and stood before the house.

Of course! Said Mr. Widmer to himself. He's afraid someone will see him. He slept all day somewhere and waited. Afraid of what people might say. Look at him there, going around and around.

He listened.

There was the calling again. Like the last cricket of the year, like the last rustle of the last oak leaf of the season. At the front door, at the back, at the bay windows. Oh, there would be a million slow footprints in the meadow lawn tomorrow when the sun rose.

Was she listening?

"Ann, Ann, oh, Ann!" Was that what he called? "Ann, can you hear me, Ann?" Was that what you called when you came back very late in the day?

And then, suddenly, Mr. Widmer stood up.

SUPPOSE SHE didn't hear him! How could he be sure she was still able to hear? Seventy years make for spider webs in the ears, gray waddings of time which dull everything for some people until they live in a universe of cotton and wool and silence.

Nobody had spoken to her in thirty years, save to open their mouths to say hello. What if she were deaf, lying there in her cold bed now like a little girl playing out a long and lonely game, never even aware someone was calling through her flake-painted door, someone was walking on the soft grass around her locked house? Perhaps not pride but a physical inability prevented her from answering!

In the living room, Mr. Widmer quietly took the phone off the hook, watching the bedroom door to be certain he hadn't wakened his wife. To the operator he said, "Helen? Give me 729."
"That you, Mr. Widmer? Funny time of night to call her."

"Never mind."

"All right, but she won't answer. Never has. Don't recall she ever has used her phone in all the years after she had it put in."

The phone rang. It rang six times, and nothing happened.

"Keep trying, Helen."

The phone rang twelve times more. His face was streaming perspiration. Someone picked up the phone at the other end.

"Miss Bidwell!" cried Mr. Widmer, almost collapsing in relief. "Miss Bidwell?" he lowered his voice. "This is Mr. Widmer, the grocer, calling."

No answer. She was on the other end, in her house, standing in the dark. Through his window he could see that her house was still unlit. She hadn't switched on any lights to find the phone.

"Miss Bidwell, do you hear me?" he asked.

Silence.

"Miss Bidwell, I want you to do me a favor," he said.

Click.

“I want you to open your front door and look out,” he said.

“She’s hung up,” said Helen. “Want me to call her again?”

“No thanks.”

He put the receiver back on the hook.

There was the house, in the morning sun, in the afternoon sun, and in the twilight—silent. Here was the grocery, with Mr. Widmer in it, thinking: She’s a fool. No matter what, she’s a fool! It’s never too late.

No matter how old, wrinkled hands are better than none. He’s travelled a long way around, and by his look, he’s never married, but always travelled, as some men do, crazy to change their scenery every week, every month, every year, until they reach an age where they find they are collecting nothing at all but a lot of empty trips and a lot of towns with no more substance to them than movie sets and a lot of people in those towns who are about as real as wax dummies seen in lighted windows late at night as you pass by on a slow, black train.

He’s been living with a world of people who didn’t care about him because he never stayed anywhere long enough to make anyone worry whether he would arise in the morning or whether he had turned to dust. And then he got to thinking about “her” and decided she was the one real person he’d ever known. And just a little too late, he took a train and got off and walked up here, and there he is on her lawn, feeling like a fool, and one more night of this and he won’t come back at all.

This was the third night. Mr. Widmer thought of going over, of breaking the glass in the firebox, of setting fire to the porch of Miss Bidwell’s house, and of causing the firemen to roar up. That would bring her out, right into the old man’s arms, by Jupiter!

But wait! Ah, but wait.

Mr. Widmer’s eyes went to the ceiling. Up there, in the attic—wasn’t there a weapon there to be used against pride and time? In all that dust, wasn’t there something with which to strike out? Something as

old as all of them—Mr. Widmer, the old man, the old lady? How long since the attic has been cleaned out? Never. But it was too ridiculous. He wouldn't dare!

And yet, this was the last night. A weapon must be provided. Ten minutes later, he heard his wife cry out to him: "Tom, Tom! What's that noise! What are you doing in the attic?"

AT ELEVEN-THIRTY, there was the old man. He stood in front of the step-less house, as if not knowing what to try next. And then he took a quick step and looked down. Mr. Widmer, from his upstairs window, whispered, "Yes, yes, go ahead."

The old man bent over. "Pick it up!" cried Mr. Widmer. The old man extended his hands.

"Brush it off! I know, I know it's dusty. But it's still fair enough. Brush it off, use it!" In the moonlight, the old man held a guitar in his hands. It had been lying in the middle of the lawn. There was a period of long waiting during which the old man turned it over with his fingers.

"Go on!" said Mr. Widmer. There was a tentative chord of music.

"Go on!" said Mr. Widmer. "What voices can't do, music can. That's it! Play! You're right, try it!" urged Mr. Widmer. And he thought: Sing under the windows, sing under the apple trees and near the back porch, sing until the guitar notes shake her, sing until she starts to cry. You get a woman to crying, and you're on safe ground. Her pride will all wash away; and the best thing to start the dissolving and crying is music.

Sing songs, sing "Genevieve, Sweet Genevieve, the years may come, the years may go," and sing "Meet Me Tonight in Dreamland," and sing

“We were Sailing Along on Moonlight Bay,” and sing “There’s a Long, Long Trail A winding,” and sing all those old summer songs and old-time songs, any song that’s old and quiet and lovely; do that, and keep on doing that; sing soft and light, with a few notes of the guitar; sing and play and perhaps you’ll hear the key turn in the lock!

He listened.

As pure as drops of water falling in the night, the guitar played, soft, soft, and it was half an hour before the old man began to sing, and it was so faint no one could hear; no one except someone behind a wall in that house, in a bed, or standing in the dark behind a shaded window.

Mr. Widmer went to bed, numb, and lay there for an hour, hearing the faraway guitar.

THE NEXT morning, Mrs. Terle said, “I seen that prowler.”

“Yes?”

“He was there all night. Playing a guitar. Can you imagine? How silly can old people get? Who is he, anyway?”

“I’m sure I don’t know,” said Mr. Widmer,

“Well, him and his guitar went away down the street at six this morning,” said Mrs. Terle.

“Did he? Didn’t he come back?”

“No.”

“Didn’t the door open for him?”

“No. Should it?”

“I suppose not. He’ll be back tonight.”

She went out.

Tonight will do it, thought Mr. Widmer. Tonight, just one more night. He’s not the sort to give up now. Now that he has the guitar, he’ll be back, and tonight will do it. Mr. Widmer whistled, moving about the store.

A truck drove up outside the store, and Mr. Frank Henderson climbed out, a kit of hammers and nails and a saw in his hands. He went around behind the truck and took out a couple of dozen fresh-cut, new pieces of raw, good-smelling lumber.

“Morning, Frank,” called Mr. Widmer. “How’s the carpentry business?”

“Picking up this morning,” said Frank. He sorted out the good, yellow lumber and the bright steel nails. “Got a job.”

“Where?”

“Miss Bidwell’s.”

“Yes?” Mr. Widmer felt his heart begin the familiar pounding.

“Yes. She phoned an hour ago. Wants me to build a new set of steps onto her front porch. Wants it done today.”

Mr. Widmer stood looking at the carpenter’s hands, at the hammer and nails, and the good fresh clean lumber. The sun was rising higher every minute now and the day was bright.

“Here,” said Mr. Widmer, picking up some of the wood. “Let me help.”

They walked across the brick street and over the lawn of Miss Bidwell’s house together, carrying the planks and the saw and the nails.

The end