



The Screaming Woman, Ray Bradbury

The Screaming Woman

My name is Margaret Leary and I'm ten years old and in the fifth grade at Central School.

I haven't any brothers or sisters, but I've got a nice father and mother except they don't pay much attention to me.

And anyway, we never thought we'd have anything to do with a murdered woman. Or almost, anyway.

When you're just living on a street like we live on, you don't think awful things are going to happen, like shooting or stabbing or burying people under the ground, practically in your back yard. And when it does happen you don't believe it. You just go on buttering your toast or baking a cake.

I got to tell you how it happened. It was a noon in the middle of July. It was hot and Mama said to me, 'Margaret, you go to the store and buy some ice cream. It's Saturday, Dad's home for lunch, so we'll have a treat.'

I ran out across the empty lot behind our house. It was a big lot, where kids had played baseball, and broken glass and stuff. And on my way back from the store with the ice cream I was just walking along, minding my own business, when all of a sudden it happened.

I heard the Screaming Woman.
I stopped and listened.
It was coming up out of the ground.

A woman was buried under the rocks and dirt and glass, and she was screaming, all wild and horrible, for someone to dig her out. I just stood there, afraid. She kept screaming, muffled.

Then I started to run. I fell down, got up, and ran some more. I got in the screen door of my house and there was Mama, calm as you please, not knowing what I knew, that there was a real live woman buried out in back of our house, just a hundred yards away, screaming bloody murder.

'Mama,' I said.

'Don't stand there with the ice cream,' said Mama.

'But, Mama,' I said.

'Put it in the icebox,' she said.

'Listen, Mama, there's a Screaming Woman in the empty lot.'

'And wash your hands,' said Mama.

'She was screaming and screaming...'

'Let's see, now, salt and pepper,' said Mama, far away.

'Listen to me,' I said, loud. 'We got to dig her out. She's buried under tons and tons of dirt and if we don't dig her out, she'll choke up and die.'

'I'm certain she can wait until after lunch,' said Mama.

'Mama, don't you believe me?'

'Of course, dear. Now wash your hands and take this plate of meat in to your father.'

'I don't even know who she is or how she got there,' I said. 'But we got to help her before it's too late.'

'Good gosh,' said Mama. 'Look at this ice cream. 'What did you do, just stand in the sun and let it melt?'

'Well, the empty lot...'

'Go on, now, scoot.'

I went into the dining room.

'Hi, Dad, there's a Screaming Woman in the empty lot.'

'I never knew a woman who didn't,' said Dad.

'I'm serious,' I said.

'You look very grave,' said Father.

'We've got to get picks and shovels and excavate, like for an Egyptian mummy,' I said.

'I don't feel like an archaeologist, Margaret,' said Father. 'Now, some nice cool October day, I'll take you up on that.'

'But we can't wait that long,' I almost screamed. My heart was bursting in me. I was excited and scared and afraid and here was Dad, putting meat on his plate, cutting and chewing and paying me no attention.

'Dad?' I said.

'Mmmm?' he said, chewing.

'Dad, you just gotta come out after lunch and help me,' I said. 'Dad, Dad, I'll give you all the money in my piggy bank!'

'Well,' said Dad. 'So it's a business proposition, is it? It must be important for you to offer your perfectly good money. How much money will you pay, by the hour?'

'I got five whole dollars it took me a year to save, and it's all yours.'

Dad touched my arm. 'I'm touched. I'm really touched. You want me to play with you and you're willing to pay for my time. Honest, Margaret, you make your old Dad feel like a piker.

I don't give you enough time. Tell you what, after lunch, I'll come out and listen to your Screaming Woman, free of charge.'

'Will you, oh, will you, really?'

'Yes, ma'am, that's what I'll do,' said Dad. 'But you must promise me one thing?'

'What?'

'If I come out, you must eat all of your lunch first.'

'I promise,' I said.

'Okay.'

Mother came in and sat down and we started to eat.

'Not so fast,' said Mama.

I slowed down. Then I started eating fast again.

'You heard your mother,' said Dad.

'The Screaming Woman,' I said. 'We got to hurry.'

'I,' said Father, 'intend sitting here quietly and judiciously giving my attention first to my steak, then to my potatoes, and my salad, of course, and then to my ice cream, and after that to a long drink of iced coffee, if you don't mind.'

I may be a good hour at it. And another thing, young lady, if you mention her name, this Screaming Whatsis, once more at this table during lunch, I won't go out with you to hear her recital.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Is that understood?'

'Yes, sir,' I said.

Lunch was a million years long. Everybody moved in slow motion, like those films you see at the movies. Mama got up slow and got down slow and forks and knives and spoons moved slow. Even the flies in the room were slow.

And Dad's cheek muscles moved slow. It was so slow. I wanted to scream, 'Hurry! Oh, please, rush, get up, run around, come on out, run!'

But no, I had to sit, and all the while we sat there slowly, slowly eating our lunch, out there in the empty lot (I could hear her screaming in my mind. Scream!) was the Screaming Woman, all alone, while the world ate its lunch and the sun was hot and the lot was empty as the sky.

'There we are,' said Dad, finished at last.

'Now will you come out to see the Screaming Woman?' I said.

'First a little more iced coffee,' said Dad.

'Speaking of Screaming Women,' said Mother, 'Charlie Nesbitt and his wife Helen had another fight last night.'

'That's nothing new,' said Father. 'They're always fighting.'

'If you ask me, Charlie's no good,' said Mother. 'Or her, either.'

'Oh, I don't know,' said Dad. 'I think she's pretty nice.'

'You're prejudiced. After all, you almost married her.'

'You going to bring that up again?' he said. 'After all, I was only engaged to her six weeks.'

'You showed some sense when you broke it off.'

'Oh, you know Helen. Always stagestruck. Wanted to travel in a trunk. I just couldn't see it. That broke it up. She was sweet, though. Sweet and kind.'

'What did it get her? A terrible brute of a husband like Charlie.'

'Dad,' I said.

'I'll give you that. Charlie has got a terrible temper,' said Dad.

'Remember when Helen had the lead in our high school graduation play? Pretty as a picture. She wrote some songs for it herself. That was the summer she wrote that song for me.'

'Ha,' said Mother.

'Don't laugh. It was a good song.'

'You never told me about that song.'

'It was between Helen and me. Let's see, how did it go?'

'Dad,' I said.

'You'd better take your daughter out in the back lot,' said Mother, 'before she collapses. You can sing me that wonderful song later.'
'Okay, come on, you,' said Dad, and I ran him out of the house.

The empty lot was still empty and hot and the glass sparkled green and white and brown all around where the bottles lay.

'Now, where's this Screaming Woman?' laughed Dad.
'We forgot the shovels,' I cried.
'We'll get them later, after we hear the soloist,' said Dad.
I took him over to the spot, 'Listen,' I said.

We listened.
'I don't hear anything,' said Dad, at last.
'Shh,' I said. 'Wait.'
We listened some more. 'Hey, there, Screaming Woman!' I cried.

We heard the sun in the sky. We heard the wind in the trees, real quiet. We heard a bus, far away, running along. We heard a car pass. That was all.

'Margaret,' said Father. 'I suggest you go lie down and put a damp cloth on your forehead.'
'But she was here.' I shouted. 'I heard her, screaming and screaming and screaming. See, here's where the ground's been dug up.' I called frantically at the earth. 'Hey there, you down there!'

'Margaret,' said Father. 'This is the place where Mr Kelly dug yesterday, a big hole, to bury his trash and garbage in.'

'But during the night,' I said, 'someone else used Mr Kelly's burying place to bury a woman. And covered it all over again.'

'Well, I'm going back in and take a cool shower,' said Dad.
'You won't help me dig?'

'Better not stay out here too long,' said Dad. 'It's hot.'

Dad walked off. I heard the back door slam.

I stamped on the ground. 'Darn,' I said.
The screaming started again.

She screamed and screamed. Maybe she had been tired and was resting and now she began it all over, just for me.

I stood in the empty lot in the hot sun and I felt like crying. I ran back to the house and banged the door.

'Dad, she's screaming again!'

'Sure, sure,' said Dad. 'Come on.' And he led me to my upstairs bedroom. 'Here,' he said. He made me lie down and put a cold rag on my head. 'Just take it easy.'

I began to cry. 'Oh, Dad, we can't let her die. She's all buried, like that person in that story by Edgar Allan Poe, and think how awful it is to be screaming and no one paying any attention.'

'I forbid you to leave the house,' said Dad, worried. 'You just lie there the rest of the afternoon.' He went out and locked the door. I heard him and Mother talking in the front room. After a while I stopped crying. I got up and tiptoed to the window. My room was upstairs. It seemed high.

I took a sheet off the bed and tied it to the bedpost and let it out the window. Then I climbed out the window and shinnied down until I touched the ground. Then I ran to the garage, quiet, and I got a couple of shovels and I ran to the empty lot. It was hotter than ever. And I started to dig, and all the while I dug, the Screaming Woman screamed...

It was hard work. Shoving in the shovel and lifting the rocks and glass. And I knew I'd be doing it all afternoon and maybe I wouldn't finish in

time. What could I do? Run tell other people? But they'd be like Mom and Dad, pay no attention. I just kept digging, all by myself.

About ten minutes later, Dippy Smith came along the path through the empty lot. He's my age and goes to my school.

'Hi, Margaret,' he said.

'Hi, Dippy,' I gasped.

'What you doing?' he asked.

'Digging.'

'For what?'

'I got a Screaming Lady in the ground and I'm digging for her,' I said.

'I don't hear no screaming,' said Dippy.

'You sit down and wait awhile and you'll hear her scream yet. Or better still, help me dig.'

'I don't dig unless I hear a scream,' he said.

We waited.

'Listen!' I cried. 'Did you hear it?'

'Hey,' said Dippy, with slow appreciation, his eyes gleaming. 'That's okay. Do it again.'

'Do what again?'

'The scream.'

'We got to wait,' I said, puzzled.

'Do it again,' he insisted, shaking my arm. 'Go on.' He dug in his pocket for a brown aggie. 'Here.' He shoved it at me. 'I'll give you this marble if you do it again.'

A scream came out of the ground.

'Hot dog!' said Dippy. 'Teach me to do it!' He danced around as if I was a miracle.

'I don't...' I started to say.

‘Did you get the Throw-Your-Voice book for a dime from that Magic Company in Dallas, Texas?’ cried Dippy. ‘You got one of those tin ventriloquist contraptions in your mouth?’

‘Y-yes,’ I lied, for I wanted him to help. ‘If you’ll help dig, I’ll tell you about it later.’

‘Swell,’ he said. ‘Give me a shovel.’

We both dug together, and from time to time the woman screamed.

‘Boy,’ said Dippy. ‘You’d think she was right under foot. You’re wonderful, Maggie.’ Then he said. ‘What’s her name?’

‘Who?’

‘The Screaming Woman. You must have a name for her.’

‘Oh, sure.’ I thought a moment. ‘Her name’s Wilma Schweiger and she’s a rich old woman, ninety-six years old, and she was buried by a man named Spike, who counterfeited ten-dollar bills.’

‘Yes, sir,’ said Dippy.

‘And there’s hidden treasure buried with her, and I. I’m a grave robber come to dig her out and get it,’ I gasped, digging excitedly.

Dippy made his eyes Oriental and mysterious. ‘Can I be a grave robber, too?’ He had a better idea. ‘Let’s pretend it’s the Princess Ommanatra, an Egyptian queen, covered with diamonds!’

We kept digging and I thought. Oh, we will rescue her, we will. If only we keep on!

‘Hey, I just got an idea,’ said Dippy. And he ran off and got a piece of cardboard. He scribbled on it with crayon.

‘Keep digging!’ I said. ‘We can’t stop!’

‘I’m making a sign. See? SLUMBERLAND CEMETERY! We can bury some birds and beetles here, in matchboxes and stuff. I’ll go find some butterflies.’

‘No, Dippy!’

‘It’s more fun that way. I’ll get me a dead cat, too, maybe...’

'Dippy, use your shovel! Please!'

'Aw,' said Dippy. 'I'm tired. I think I'll go home and take a nap.'

'You can't do that.'

'Who says so?'

'Dippy, there's something I want to tell you.'

'What?'

He gave the shovel a kick.

I whispered in his ear. 'There's really a woman buried here.'

'Why sure there is,' he said. 'You said it, Maggie.'

'You don't believe me, either.'

'Tell me how you throw your voice and I'll keep on digging.'

'But I can't tell you, because I'm not doing it.' I said, 'Look, Dippy. I'll stand way over here and you listen there.'

The Screaming Woman screamed again.

'Hey!' said Dippy. 'There really is a woman here!'

'That's what I tried to say.'

'Let's dig!' said Dippy.

We dug for twenty minutes.

'I wonder who she is?'

'I don't know.'

'I wonder if it's Mrs Nelson or Mrs Turner or Mrs Bradley. I wonder if she's pretty. Wonder what color her hair is? Wonder if she's thirty or ninety or sixty?'

'Dig!' I said.

The mound grew high.

'Wonder if she'll reward us for digging her up.'

'Sure.'

'A quarter, do you think?'

'More than that. I bet it's a dollar.'

Dippy remembered as he dug, 'I read a book once of magic. There was a Hindu with no clothes on who crept down in a grave and slept there

sixty days, not eating anything, no malts, no chewing gum or candy, no air, for sixty days.' His face fell. 'Say, wouldn't it be awful if it was only a radio buried here and us working so hard?'

'A radio's nice, it'd be all ours.'

Just then a shadow fell across us.

'Hey, you kids, what you think you're doing?'

We turned. It was Mr Kelly, the man who owned the empty lot. 'Oh, hello, Mr Kelly,' we said.

'Tell you what I want you to do,' said Mr Kelly. 'I want you to take those shovels and take that soil and shovel it right back in that hole you been digging. That's what I want you to do.'

My heart started beating fast again. I wanted to scream myself.

'But Mr Kelly, there's a Screaming Woman and...'

'I'm not interested. I don't hear a thing.'

'Listen!' I cried.

The scream.

Mr Kelly listened and shook his head. 'Don't hear nothing. Go on now, fill it up and get home with you before I give you my foot!'

We filled the hole all back in again. And all the while we filled it in, Mr Kelly stood there, arms folded, and the woman screamed, but Mr Kelly pretended not to hear it.

When we were finished, Mr Kelly stomped off, saying, 'Go on home now. And if I catch you here again...'

I turned to Dippy. 'He's the one,' I whispered.

'Huh?' said Dippy.

'He murdered Mrs Kelly. He buried her here, after he strangled her, in a box, but she came to. Why, he stood right here and she screamed and he wouldn't pay any attention.'

'Hey,' said Dippy. 'That's right. He stood right here and lied to us.'

'There's only one thing to do.' I said. 'Call the police and have them come arrest Mr Kelly.'

We ran for the corner store telephone.

The police knocked on Mr Kelly's door five minutes later. Dippy and I were hiding in the bushes, listening.

'Mr Kelly?' said the police officer.

'Yes, sir, what can I do for you?'

'Is Mrs Kelly at home?'

'Yes, sir.'

'May we see her, sir?'

'Of course. Hey, Anna!'

Mrs Kelly came to the door and looked out. 'Yes, sir?'

'I beg your pardon,' apologized the officer. 'We had a report that you were buried out in an empty lot, Mrs Kelly. It sounded like a child made the call, but we had to be certain. Sorry to have troubled you.'

'It's those blasted kids,' cried Mr Kelly, angrily. 'If I ever catch them, I'll rip them limb from limb!'

'Cheezit!' said Dippy, and we both ran.

'What'll we do now?' I said.

'I got to go home,' said Dippy. 'Boy, we're really in trouble. We'll get a licking for this.'

'But what about the Screaming Woman?'

'To heck with her,' said Dippy. 'We don't dare go near that empty lot again. Old man Kelly'll be waiting around with his razor strap and lambast heck out'n us. And I just happened to remember, Maggie. Ain't old man Kelly sort of deaf, hard-of-hearing?'

'Oh, my gosh,' I said. 'No wonder he didn't hear the screams.'

'So long,' said Dippy. 'We sure got in trouble over your darn old ventriloquist voice. I'll be seeing you.'

I was left all alone in the world, no one to help me, no one to believe me at all. I just wanted to crawl down in that box with the Screaming

Woman and die. The police were after me now, for lying to them, only I didn't know it was a lie, and my father was probably looking for me, too, or would be once he found my bed empty. There was only one last thing to do, and I did it.

I went from house to house, all down the street, near the empty lot. And I rang every bell and when the door opened I said: 'I beg your pardon, Mrs Griswold, but is anyone missing from your house?' or 'Hello, Mrs Pikes, you're looking fine today. Glad to see you home.' And once I saw that the lady of the house was home I just chatted awhile to be polite, and went on down the street.

The hours were rolling along. It was getting late. I kept thinking, oh, there's only so much air in that box with that woman under the earth, and if I don't hurry, she'll suffocate, and I got to rush! So I rang bells and knocked on doors, and it got later, and I was just about to give up and go home, when I knocked on the last door, which was the door of Mr Charlie Nesbitt, who lives next to us. I kept knocking and knocking.

Instead of Mrs Nesbitt, or Helen as my father calls her, coming to the door, why it was Mr Nesbitt. Charlie, himself.

'Oh,' he said. 'It's you, Margaret.'

'Yes,' I said. 'Good afternoon.'

'What can I do for you, kid?' he said.

'Well, I thought I'd like to see your wife, Mrs Nesbitt,' I said.

'Oh,' he said.

'May I?'

'Well, she's gone out to the store,' he said.

'I'll wait,' I said, and slipped in past him.

'Hey,' he said.

I sat down in a chair. 'My, it's a hot day,' I said, trying to be calm, thinking about the empty lot and air going out of the box, and the screams getting weaker and weaker.

'Say, listen, kid,' said Charlie, coming over to me, 'I don't think you better wait.'

'Oh, sure,' I said. 'Why not?'

'Well, my wife won't be back,' he said.

'Oh?'

'Not today, that is. She's gone to the store, like I said, but, but, she's going on from there to visit her mother. Yeah. She's going to visit her mother, in Schenectady. She'll be back, two or three days, maybe a week.'

'That's a shame,' I said.

'Why?'

'I wanted to tell her something.'

'What?'

'I just wanted to tell her there's a woman buried over in the empty lot, screaming under tons and tons of dirt.'

Mr Nesbitt dropped his cigarette.

'You dropped your cigarette, Mr Nesbitt.' I pointed out, with my shoe.

'Oh, did I? Sure. So I did,' he mumbled. 'Well, I'll tell Helen when she comes home, your story. She'll be glad to hear it.'

'Thanks. It's a real woman.'

'How do you know it is?'

'I heard her.'

'How, how you know it isn't, well, a mandrake root?'

'What's that?'

'You know. A mandrake. It's a kind of a plant, kid. They scream. I know, I read it once. How you know it ain't a mandrake?'

'I never thought of that.'

'You better start thinking,' he said, lighting another cigarette. He tried to be casual. 'Say, kid, you, eh, you say anything about this to anyone?' 'Sure. I told lots of people.'

Mr Nesbitt burned his hand on his match.

'Anybody doing anything about it?' he asked.

'No,' I said. 'They won't believe me.'

He smiled. 'Of course. Naturally. You're nothing but a kid. Why should they listen to you?'

'I'm going back now and dig her out with a spade,' I said.

'Wait.'

'I got to go,' I said.

'Stick around,' he insisted.

'Thanks, but no,' I said, frantically.

He took my arm. 'Know how to play cards, kid? Black jack?'

'Yes, sir.'

He took out a deck of cards from a desk. 'We'll have a game.'

'I got to go dig.'

'Plenty of time for that,' he said, quiet. 'Anyway, maybe my wife'll be home. Sure. That's it. You wait for her. Wait awhile.'

'You think she will be?'

'Sure, kid. Say, about that voice: is it very strong?'

'It gets weaker all the time.'

Mr Nesbitt sighed and smiled. 'You and your kid games. Here now, let's play that game of black jack, it's more fun than Screaming Women.'

'I got to go. It's late.'

'Stick around, you got nothing to do.'

I knew what he was trying to do. He was trying to keep me in his house until the screaming died down and was gone. He was trying to keep me from helping her. 'My wife'll be home in ten minutes,' he said. 'Sure. Ten minutes. You wait. You sit right there.'

We played cards. The clock ticked. The sun went down the sky. It was getting late. The screaming got fainter and fainter in my mind. 'I got to go.' I said.

'Another game,' said Mr Nesbitt. 'Wait another hour, kid. My wife'll come yet. Wait.'

In another hour he looked at his watch. 'Well, kid, I guess you can go now.' And I knew what his plan was. He'd sneak down in the middle of the night and dig up his wife, still alive, and take her somewhere else and bury her, good. 'So long, kid. So long.' He let me go, because he thought that by now the air must all be gone from the box.

The door shut in my face.

I went back near the empty lot and hid in some bushes. What could I do? Tell my folks? But they hadn't believed me. Call the police on Mr Charlie Nesbitt? But he said his wife was away visiting. Nobody would believe me!

I watched Mr Kelly's house. He wasn't in sight. I ran over to the place where the screaming had been and just stood there.

The screaming had stopped. It was so quiet I thought I would never hear a scream again. It was all over. I was too late, I thought.

I bent down and put my ear against the ground.

And then I heard it, way down, way deep, and so faint I could hardly hear it.

The woman wasn't screaming any more. She was singing. Something about, 'I loved you fair, I loved you well.'

It was sort of a sad song. Very faint. And sort of broken. All of those hours down under the ground in that box must have sort of made her crazy. All she needed was some air and food and she'd be all right. But she just kept singing, not wanting to scream any more, not caring, just singing.

I listened to the song.

And then I turned and walked straight across the lot and up the steps to my house and I opened the front door.

'Father,' I said.

'So there you are!' he cried.

'Father,' I said.

'You're going to get a licking,' he said.

'She's not screaming any more.'

'Don't talk about her!'

'She's singing now,' I cried.

'You're not telling the truth!'

'Dad,' I said. 'She's out there and she'll be dead soon if you don't listen to me. She's out there, singing, and this is what she's singing.' I hummed the tune. I sang a few of the words. 'I loved you fair, I loved you well...'

Dad's face grew pale. He came and took my arm.

'What did you say?' he said.

I sang it again: 'I loved you fair, I loved you well.'

'Where did you hear that song?' he shouted.

'Out in the empty lot, just now.'

'But that's Helen's song, the one she wrote, years ago, for me!' cried Father. 'You can't know it. Nobody knew it, except Helen and me. I never sang it to anyone, not you or anyone.'

'Sure,' I said.

'Oh, my God!' cried Father, and ran out the door to get a shovel. The last I saw of him he was in the empty lot, digging, and lots of other people with him, digging.

I felt so happy I wanted to cry.

I dialed a number on the phone and when Dippy answered I said, 'Hi, Dippy. Everything's fine. Everything's worked out keen. The Screaming Woman isn't screaming any more.'

'Swell,' said Dippy.

'I'll meet you in the empty lot with a shovel in two minutes,' I said.

'Last one there's a monkey! So long!' cried Dippy.

'So long. Dippy!' I said, and ran.

The end