

# The Very Gentle Murders, Ray Bradbury

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Joshua Enderby awoke in the middle of the night because he felt someone's fingers at his throat.

In the rich darkness above him he sensed but could not see his wife's frail, skelatinous weight seated on his chest while she dabbled and clenched tremblingly again and again at his neck.

He opened his eyes wide. He realized what she was trying to do. It was so ridiculous he almost cried out with laughter!

His rickety, jaundiced, eighty-five-year-old wife was trying to strangle him!

She panted forth a rum-and-bitters smell as she perched there, toppling like a drunken moth, tinkering away as if he were a toy. She sighed irritably and her skinny fingers began to swear as she gasped, "Why don't you, oh, why don't you?"

Why don't I what? he wondered idly, lying there. He swallowed and this faint action of his Adam's apple dislodged her feeble clutch. Why don't I die; is that it? he cried silently. He lay another few moments, wondering if she'd gain strength enough to do him in. She didn't.

Should he snap on the light to confront her? Wouldn't she look a silly ass, a skinny chicken aloft sidesaddle on her hated husband's amazed body, and him laughing?

Joshua Enderby groaned and yawned. "Missy?"  
Her hands froze on his collarbone.

"Will you-" He turned, pretending half sleep. "Will you-please" '-he yawned-' 'move to your side - of the bed? Eh? Good girl."

Missy moved off in the dark. He heard ice tinkle. She was having another shot of rum.

At noon the next day, enjoying the weather and waiting for luncheon guests to arrive, old Joshua and Missy traded drinks in the garden pavilion. He handed her Dubonnet; she gave him sherry.

There was a moment of silence as both eyed the stuff and hesitated to sip. He handled his glass in such a way that his large white diamond ring sparked and glittered on his palsied hand. Its light made him flinch and at last he gathered his phlegm.

"Missy," he said. "You haven't long to live, you know." Missy was hidden behind jonquils in a crystal bowl and now peered out at her mummified husband. Both perceived that the other's hands shook. She wore a cobalt dress, heavily iced with luncheon jewels, little glittery planets under each ear, a scarlet design for a mouth. The ancient whore of Babylon, he thought dryly.

"How odd, my dear, how very odd," Missy said with a polite scrape of her voice. "Why, only last night-"

"You were thinking of me?"

"We must talk."

"Yes, we must." He leaned like a wax mannequin in his chair. "No rush. But if I do you in, or if you do me in (it matters not which), let's protect each other, yes? Oh, don't look at me in amaze, my dear. I was perfectly aware of your little gallup last night on my ribs, fumbling with my esophagus, feeling the tumblers click, or whatever."

"Dear me." Blood rose in Missy's powdery cheeks. "Were you awake all during? I'm mortified. I think I shall have to go lie down."

"Nonsense." Joshua stopped her. "If I die, you should be shielded so no one'll accuse you. Same with me, if you die. Why go to all the trouble of trying to-eliminate-each other if it just means a gallows-drop or a french fry."

"Logical enough," she agreed.

"I suggest a-a series of mash notes to each other. Umm, lavish displays of sentiment before friends, gifts, et cetera. I'll run up bills for flowers, diamond bracelets. You purchase fine leather wallets and gold-ferruled canes for me."

"You have a head for things, I must say," she admitted.

"It will help allay suspicion if we appear madly, anciently in love."

"You know," she said tiredly, "it doesn't matter, Joshua, which of us dies first, except that I'm very old and would like to do one thing right in my life. I've always been such a dilettante. I've never liked you. Loved you, yes, but that's ten million years back. You never were a friend. If it weren't for the children--"

"Motives are bilge," he said. "We are two querulous old pots with nothing to do but kick off, and make a circus of that. But how much better the dying game if we write a few rules, act it neatly, with no one the wiser. How long has this assassination plot of yours been active?"

She beamed. "Remember the opera last week? You slipped from the curb? That car almost nailed you?"

"Good Lord." He laughed. "I thought someone shoved both of us!" He leaned forward, chuckling. "Okay. When you fell in the bath last month? I greased the tub!"

Unthinkingly, she gasped, drank part of her Dubonnet, then froze. Reading her mind, he stared at his own drink.

"This isn't poisoned, by any chance?" He sniffed his glass. "Don't be silly," she replied, touching her Dubonnet with a lizard's doubtful tongue. "They'd find the residue in what's left of your stomach. Just be sure you double-check your shower tonight. I have kited the temperature, which might bring on a seizure."

"You didn't!" he scoffed.

"I've thought about it," she confessed.

The front-door chimes rang, but not with their usual joy, sounding more funereal. Nonsense! Joshua thought. Bosh! thought Missy, then brightened:

"We have forgotten our luncheon guest! That's the Gowrys! He's a bore, but be nice! Fix your collar."

"It's damned tight. Too much starch. One more plot to strangle me?"

"I wish I had thought of that. Double time, now!"

And they marched, arm in arm, with idiot laughter, off to meet the half-forgotten Gowrys.

Cocktails were served. The old relics sat side by side, hands laced like school chums, laughing with weak heartiness at Gowry's dire jokes.

They leaned forward to show him their porcelain smiles, saying, "Oh, that's a good one!" loudly, and, softly, sotto voce; to each other:

"Thought of anything new?" "Electric razor in your bath?" "Not bad, not bad!"

"And then Pat said to Mike!" cried Mr. Gowry.

From the corner of his mouth Joshua whispered to Missy, "You know, I dislike you with something approaching the colossal proportions of first love. You have taught me mayhem. How?"

"When the teacher is ready, the pupil will arrive," whispered Missy.

Laughter rose in tumbling, whirling waves. The room was giddy, airy, light. "So Pat says to Mike, do it yourself!" boomed Gowry.

"Oh, ho!" everyone exploded.

"Now, dear." Missy waved at her ancient husband. "Tell one of your jokes. Oh, but first," she remembered cleverly, "trot down-cellar, darling, and fetch the brandy."

Gowry sprang forward with wild courtesy. "I know where it is!"

"Oh, Mr. Gowry, don't!"

Missy gestured frantically.

Mr. Gowry ran from the room.

"Oh, dear, dear me," cried Missy.

A moment later, Gowry uttered a loud shriek from the basement, followed by a thunderous crash.

Missy hippety-hopped out, only to reappear moments later, her hand clutched to her throat. "Heavens to Betsy," she wailed. "Come look. I do believe Mr. Gowry has pitched himself straight down the cellar stairs!"

The next morning Joshua Enderby shuffled into the house lugging a large green velvet board some five feet by three, on which pistols were clasped in display.

"Here I am!" he shouted.

Missy appeared with a rum Collins in one bracelet-jangly hand, her cane thumping in the other. "What's that?" she demanded.

"First, how's old Gowry?"

"Broken leg. Wished it had been his vocal cords."

"Shame about that top cellar step gone loose, eh?" The old man hooked the green velvet board to the wall. "Good thing Gowry lurched for the brandy, not I."

"Shame." The wife drank thirstily. "Explain."

"I'm in the antique-gun-collecting business." He waved at the weapons in their neat leather nests.

"I don't see-"

"With a collection of guns to clean-bang!" He beamed. "Man shoots wife while oiling matchlock garter pistol. Didn't know it was loaded, says weeping spouse."

"Touche'," she said.

An hour later, while oiling a revolver, he almost blew his brains out. His wife came thumping in and froze. "Hell. You're still alive."

"Loaded, by God!" He lifted the weapon in a trembling hand. "None were loaded! Unless-"

"Unless-?"

He seized three more weapons. "All loaded! You!"

"Me," she said. "While you ate lunch. I suppose I'll have to give you tea now. Come along."

He stared at the bullet hole in the wall. "Tea, hell," he said. "Where's the gin?!"

It was her turn for a shopping spree. "There are ants in the house." She rattled her full shopping bag and set out ant-paste pots in all the rooms, sprinkled ant powders on windowsills, in his golf bag, and over his gun collection. From other sacks she drew rat poisons, mouse-killers, and bug-exterminators. "A bad summer for roaches." She distributed these liberally among the foods.

"That's a double-edged sword," he observed. "You'll fall on it!"

"Bilge. The victim mustn't choose his demise."

"Yes, but no violence. I wish a serene face for the coroner."

"Vanity. Dear Josh, your face will twist like a corkscrew with one heaping teaspoon of Black Leaf Forty in your midnight cocoa!"

"I," he shot back, "know a recipe that will break you out in a thousand lumps before expiring"

She quieted. "Why, Josh, I wouldn't dream of using Black Leaf Forty."

He bowed. "I wouldn't dream of using the thousand-lump recipe."

"Shake," she said.

Their assassins game continued. He bought huge rattraps to hide in the halls. "You run barefoot so: small wounds, large infections!"

She in turn stuck the sofas full of antimacassar pins. Wherever he laid a hand it drew blood. "Ow! Damn!" He sucked his fingers. "Are these Amazon Indian blowgun darts?"

"No. Just plain old rusty lockjaw needles."

"Oh," he said.

Though he was aging fast, Joshua Enderby dearly loved to drive. You could see him motoring with feeble wildness up and down the hills of Beverly, mouth gaped, eyes blinking palely.

One afternoon he phoned from Malibu. "Missy? My God, I almost dove from a cliff. My right front wheel flew off on a straightaway!"

"I planned it for a curve!"

"Sorry."

"Got the idea from Action News. Loosen car's wheel lugs: tomato surprise."

"Never mind about careless old me," he said. "What's new with you?"

"Rug slipped on the hall stairs. Maid fell on her prat."

"Poor Lila."

"I send her everywhere ahead now. She bucketed down like a laundry bag. Lucky she's all fat."

"We'll kill that one between us if we're not careful."

"Do you think? Oh, I do like Lila so."

"Lay Lila off for a spell. Hire someone new. If we catch them in our crossfire, won't be so sad. Hate to think of Lila smashed under a chandelier or-"

"Chandelier!" Missy shrieked. "You been fiddling with my grandma's Fountainsbleu Palace crystal hangings? Listen here, mister. You're not to touch that chandelier!"

"Promise," he muttered.

"Good grief! Those lovely crystals! If they fell and missed me, I'd hop on one leg to cane you to death, then wake you up and cane you again!" Slam went the phone.

Joshua Enderby stepped in from the balcony at supper that night. He'd been smoking. He looked at the table. "Where's your strawberry crumpet?"

"I wasn't hungry. I gave it to the new maid."

"Idiot!"

She glared. "Don't tell me you poisoned that crumpet, you old S.O.B.?" There was a crash from the kitchen.

Joshua went to look and returned. "She's not new any-more," he said. They stashed the new maid in an attic trunk. No one telephoned to ask for her.

"Disappointing," observed Missy on the seventh day. "I felt certain there'd be a tall, cold man with a notebook and another with a camera and flashbulbs flashing. Poor girl was lonelier than we guessed."

Cocktail parties streamed wildly through the house. It was Missy's idea. "So we can pick each other off in a forest of obstacles; moving targets!" Mr. Gowry, gamely returning to the house, limping after his tumble of some weeks before, joked, laughed, and didn't quite blow his ear off with one of the dueling pistols. Everyone roared but the party broke up early. Gowry vowed never to return.

Then there was a Miss Kummer, who, staying overnight, borrowed Joshua's electric razor and was almost but not quite electrocuted. She left the house rubbing her right underarm. Joshua promptly grew a beard.

Soon after, a Mr. Schlagel vanished. So did a Mr. Smith. The last seen of these unfortunates was at a Saturday night soiree at the Enderbys' mansion.

"Hide-and-seeK?" Friends slapped Joshua's back jovially.

"How do you do it? Kill 'em with toadstools, plant 'em like mushrooms?"

"Grand joke, yes!" chortled Joshua. "No, no, ha, not toadstools, but one got locked in our stand-up fridge. Overnight Eskimo Pie. The other tripped on a croquet hoop. Defenestrated through a greenhouse window."

"Eskimo Pie, defenestrated!" hooted the party people. "Dear Joshua, you are a card!"

"I speak only the truth," Joshua protested.

"What won't you think of next?"

"One wonders what did happen to old Schlagel and that rascal Smith."



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"What did happen to Schlagel and Smith?" Missy inquired some days later.

"Let me explain. The Eskimo Pie was my dessert. But the croquet hoop? No! Did you spot it in the wrong place, hoping I'd pop by and lunge through the greenhouse panes?"

Missy turned to stone; he had touched a nerve.

"Well, now, it's time for a wee talk," he said. "Cancel the parties. One more victim and sirens will announce the arrival of the law."

"Yes," Missy agreed. "Our target practice seems to wind up in ricochet. About that croquet hoop. You always take midnight greenhouse walks. Why was that damn fool Schlagel stumbling about out there at two a.m.? Dumb ox. Is he still under the compost?"

"Until I stash him with he-who-is-frozen."

"Dear, dear. No more parties."

"Just you, me and-ah-the chandelier?"

"Ah, no. I've hid the stepladder so you can't climb!"

"Damn," said Joshua.

That night by the fireplace, he poured a few glasses of their best port. While he was out of the room, answering the telephone, she dropped a little white powder in her own glass.

"Hate this," she murmured. "Terribly unoriginal. But there won't be an inquest. He looked long dead before he died, they'll say as they shut the lid." And she added a touch more lethal stuff to her port just as he wandered in to sit and pluck up his glass. He eyed it and fixed his wife a grin. "Ah, no, no, you don't!"

"Don't what?" she said, all innocence.

The fire crackled warmly, gently on the hearth. The mantel clock ticked.

"You don't mind, do you, my dear, if we exchange drinks?"

"Surely you don't think I poisoned your drink while you were out?"

"Trite. Banal. But possible."

"Well, then, fussy budget, trade."

He looked surprised but traded glasses.

"Here's not looking at you!" both said, and laughed.

They drank with mysterious smiles.

And then they sat with immense satisfaction in their easy chairs, the firelight glimmering on their ghost-pale faces, letting the port warm their almost spidery veins. He stuck his legs out and held one hand to the fire. "Ah." He sighed.

"Nothing, nothing quite like port!"

She leaned her small gray head back, dozing, gumming her red-sticky mouth, and glancing at him with half-secretive, lazy eyes. "Poor Lila," she murmured.

"Yes," he murmured. "Lila. Poor."

The fire popped and she at last added, "Poor Mr. Schlagel."

"Yes." He drowsed. "Poor Schlagel. Don't forget Smith."

"And you, old man," she said finally, slowly, slyly. "How do you feel?"

"Sleepy."

"Very sleepy?"

"Un-huh." He studied her with bright eyes. "And, my dear, what about you?"

"Sleepy," she said behind closed eyes. Then they popped wide. "Why all these questions?"

"Indeed," he said, stirring alert. "Why?"

"Oh, well, because . . ." She examined her little black shoe moving in a low rhythm a long way off below her knee. "I think, or perhaps imagine, I have just destroyed your digestive and nervous systems."

For the moment he was drowsily content and examined the warm fire and listened to the clock tick. "What you mean is that you have just poisoned me?" He dreamed the words. "You what!?" He jumped as all the air gusted from his body. The port glass shattered on the floor. She leaned forward like a fortune-teller eagerly predicting futures.

"I cleverly poisoned my own drink and knew that you'd ask to trade off, so you felt safe. And we did!" Her laugh tinkled.

He fell back in his chair, clutching at his face to stop the wild swiveling of his eyes. Then suddenly he remembered something and let out an incredible explosion of laughter.

"Why," cried Missy, "why are you laughing?"

"Because," he gasped, tears streaming down his cheeks, his mouth grinning horribly, "I poisoned my drink! and hoped for an excuse to change with you!"

"Oh, dear," she cried, no longer smiling. "How stupid of us. Why didn't I guess?"

"Because both of us are much too clever by far!" And he lay back, chortling.

"Oh, the mortification, the embarrassment, I feel stark naked and hate myself!"

"No, no," he husked. "Think instead how much you still hate me."

"With all my withered heart and soul. You?"

"No deathbed forgiveness here, old lily-white iron-maiden wife O mine. Cheerio," he added faintly, far away.

"If you think I'll say 'Cheerio' back, you're crazed," she whispered, her head rolling to one side, her eyes clamped, her mouth gone loose around the words. "But what the hell. Cheer-"

At which her breath ceased and the fire burned to ashes as the clock ticked and ticked in the quiet room.

Friends found them strewn in their library chairs the next day, both looking more than usually pleased with their situation.

"A suicide pact," said all. "So great their love they could not bear to let the other vanish alone into eternity."

"I hope," said Mr. Gowry, on his crutches, "my wife will someday join me in similar drinks."

The end