



There Was An Old Woman, Ray Bradbury

There Was an Old Woman

'NO, there's no lief arguing. I got my mind fixed. You run along with your silly wicker basket. Land, land, where you ever get notions like that? You just skit out of here and don't bother me, I got my tattin' and knittin' to do, and no never minds about tall dark gentlemen with fangled ideas.'

The tall dark young man stood quietly, not moving. Aunt Tildy hurried on with her talk.

'You heard what I said, young man. If you got a mind to talk to me, well, you can talk, but meantime I hope you don't mind if I pour myself a bit of coffee. There. If you'd been a bit more polite, I mighta offered you some; but you stride in here high and mighty and you never rapped on the door or nothing. I don't like that kind of doing. You think you own the place.'

Aunt Tildy fussed with her lap. 'Land, now, where'd I lay the yarn? I'm making myself a comforter. These winters get on mighty chill, I'll allow, and it ain't fittin' for a lady with bones like rice-paper to be settin' in a draughty old house like this without warmin' herself.'

The tall dark man sat down.

'That's an antique chair, so be gentle on it,' warned Aunt Tildy. 'Now, if you wants to start again, tell me things you got to tell, I'll listen respectful. But keep your voice in your shoes and stop staring at me with funny lights in your eyes. Land, it gives me the collie-wobbles.'

The bone-porcelain, flowered clock on the mantel finished chiming three. Out in the hall, grouped around the wicker basket, four men waited, quietly, hardly moving, as if they were frozen.

'Now, about that wicker basket,' said Aunt Tildy. 'It's past six feet long, and by the look of it, it ain't laundry. And those four men you walked in

with, you don't need them to carry that basket — why, it's light as thistles. Eh?'

The dark young man was leaning forward on the antique chair. Something in his face suggested that the basket wouldn't be so light after a while. There'd be something in it.

'Shaw, now.' Aunt Tildy mused. 'Now where've I seen wicker like that before? Seems it was only a couple year ago. Seems to me — oh! Now I remembers. Certainly I do. It was when Mrs. Dwyer passed away next door.'

Aunt Tildy set her coffee cup down, sternly. 'So that's what you're up on? I thought you were workin' to sell me something. Just set until my little Emily trounces home from college this afternoon! I wrote her a note the other day. Not admittin', of course, that I wasn't feelin' quite ripe and pert, but sort of hintin' I want to see her again, it's been a bunch of weeks. She livin' in New York and all. Almost like my own daughter, Emily is.

'Now, she'll take care of you, young man. She'll shoo you out'n this parlour so quick it'll — '

The dark young man looked at her as if she were tired.

'No, I'm not,' snapped Aunt Tildy.

He weaved back and forth on the chair, half shutting his eyes, resting himself. Maybe she would like to rest, too? Nice rest.

'Great sons of Goshen on the Gilberry Dike! I got a hunderd comforters, two hunderds of sweaters and six hunderds of pot-holders in these fingers, no matter they're skinny! You run away and come back when I'm done, and maybe I'll talk to you.' Aunt Tildy shifted subjects. 'Let me tell you about Emily. She's such a sweet, fair child.'

Aunt Tildy nodded thoughtfully. Emily. With hair like light yellow corn tassles, just as soft and sweet.

'I well remembers the day her mother died, twenty years ago, leavin' Emily to my house. That's why I'm mad at you and your wickers and such goings-on. Who ever heard of people dyin' for any good cause? Young man, I don't like it. Why, I remembers — '

Aunt Tildy paused, a brief pain of memory touched her heart. She remembered twenty-five years back, her father's voice in that old-time fragment:

'Tildy,' he'd said, 'what are you going to do in life? The way you act, men don't have much with you. Nothing permanent, I mean. You kiss and run. You don't settle down and marry and raise children.'

'Papa,' Tildy snapped right back at him, 'I like laughin' and playin' and singin', but I'm not the marryin' kind. You know why?'

'Why?' asked Papa.

'I can't find a man with my philosophy, Papa.'

'What 'philosophy's' that?'

'That death is silly! And it is. It took Mama when we needed her most. Now, do you call that intelligent?'

Papa looked at her and his eyes got wet and grey and bleak. He patted her shoulder. 'You're always right, Tildy. But what can we do? Death comes to everybody.'

'Fight back!' she cried. 'Strike it under the belt! Fight it! Don't believe in it!'

'It can't be done,' said Papa, sadly. 'Each of us is all alone in the world.'

'There's got to be a start somewhere, Papa. I'm startin' my own philosophy here and now,' Tildy declared. 'Why, it's just silly that people live a couple years and then are dropped like a wet seed in a hole and nothing sprouts but a smell. What good do they do that way? They lay there a million years, helpin' nobody. Most of them fine, nice and neat people, or at least tryin'.'

So, after a few years, Papa died. Aunt Tildy remembered how she'd tried to talk him out of it, but he passed on anyway. Then she ran off.

She couldn't stay with him after he was cold. He was a denial of her philosophy. She didn't attend his burial. She didn't do anything but set up this antique shop on the front of this old house and live alone for years, that is until Emily came. Tildy didn't want to take the girl in. Why? Because Emily believed in dying. But her mother was an old friend, and Tildy had promised help.

'Emily,' continued Aunt Tildy, to the man in black, 'was the first body to live in this house with me in years. I never got married. I didn't like the idea of livin' with a man twenty — thirty years and then have him up and die on me. It'd shake my philosophy down like a tower of cards. I shied away from the world pretty much. I guess I got pretty pernickety with people if they ever so much as mentioned death.'

The young man listened patiently, politely. Then he lifted his hand. He seemed to know everything, with the shine in his cheeks, without her opening her mouth. He knew about her and the last war, in 1917, when she never read a newspaper. He knew about the time when she beat a man on the head with her umbrella and drove him from her shop because he insisted on telling her about the Argonne battle!

Yes, and the dark young man, smiling at her from his seat on the antique chair, he knew about when radio came in, and how Aunt Tildy had stuck to her nice old phonograph records. Harry Lauder singing 'Roamin' In The Gloamin'', Madame Schumann-Heink and lullabies. With no interruptions of news; calamities, murders, mortalities, poisonings, accidents, terrors. Music that was the same each day. As the years went, Aunt Tildy had tried to teach Emily her philosophy. But Emily's mind was made up about — certain things. She was nice enough to respect Aunt Tildy's way of thinking, and she never mentioned — morbid things.

All these things, the young man knew.

Aunt Tildy sniffed. 'Think you're smart, huh? How you know all those things?' She shrugged. 'Well, now, if you think you can come and talk me into that silly wicker basket, you're way off the trestle. You so much as lay a hand on me, I'll spit right in your face!'

The young man smiled. Aunt Tildy sniffed again.

'You don't have to simper like a sick dog at me. I'm too old to be made love at. That's all twisted dry, like an old tube of paint, and left behind in the years.'

There was a noise. The mantel clock sounded three. Aunt Tildy fastened her eyes on it. Strange. It seemed to her that it had just sounded three once before, five minutes ago. She liked the old clock. Bone-pale porcelain, gold angels dangling naked around the numeraled face of it. Nice tone. Like cathedral chimes made small and soft.

'Are you just goin' to sit there, young man?'

He was.

'Then, you won't mind if I take a nap. Just a little cat-nap. Now, don't you get up off that chair. You set right there. You set there and don't come creepin' around me, toddying. Just goin' to close my eyes for a wee spell. That's right. That's right. . .'

Nice and quiet and restful time of day. No noise. Silence. Just the clock ticking away, busy as termites in wood. Just the old room smelling of polished mahogany and oiled leather in the morris chair, and books sitting stiff on the shelves. So nice.

You aren't gettin' up from the chair, are you, mister? Better not. I got one eye open for you. Yes, indeed I have. Yes, I have. Oh. Ah. Hmm. So feathery. So drowsy. So deep. Under water, almost. Oh, so nice.

Who's that movin' around in the dark with my eyes closed?

Who's that kissin' my cheek? You, Emily? No. No. Guess it was my thoughts. Only — dreamin'. Land, yes, that it is. Driftin' off, off, off. . .
AH? WHAT SAY? OH!

'Just a moment while I put on my glasses. There!'

The clock chimed three again. Shame, old clock! Have to have it fixed.

The young man in the dark suit stood near the door. Aunt Tildy nodded her head.

'You leavin' so soon, young man? Good thing! Emily's comin' home and she'd fix you. Had to give up, didn't you? Couldn't convince me, could you? I'm mule-stubborn. You couldn't get me out of this house, nosirree. Well, young man, you needn't bother comin' back to try again.'

The young man bowed with slow dignity. He had no intention of coming again. Ever.

'Fine,' declared Aunt Tildy. 'I always told Papa I'd win out. Why, I'm going to knit in this window the next thousand years. They'll have to chew the boards down around me to get me out.'

The dark young man twinkled his eyes.

'Quit lookin' like the cat that ate the bird,' cried Aunt Tildy. 'Get out! And tote that old fool wicker box with you!'

The four men treaded heavily out the front door. Tildy studied the way they handled the wicker. It wasn't heavy, yet they staggered with its weight.

'Here, now!' She rose in tremulous indignation. 'Did you steal some of my antiques? My books?' She glanced about concernedly. 'No. The clocks? No. What you got in that wicker?'

The dark young man whistled jauntily, turning his back to her and walking along behind the four staggering men. At the door he pointed to the wicker, offered its lid to Aunt Tildy. In pantomime he wondered if she would like to open it and gaze inside.

'Curious? Me? Shaw, no! Get out! Get it outa here!' cried Tildy.

The dark young man tapped a hat on to his head, saluted her crisply good-bye.

'Good-bye!' said Tildy. 'Go away!'

The door slammed. That was better. Gone. Darned fool men with their maggoty ideas. No never minds about the wicker. If they stole something, she didn't care, long as they let her alone.

'Look,' said Aunt Tildy, pleased. 'Here comes Emily, home from college. About time. Lovely girl. See how she walks. But, Land, she looks pale and funny today. Walking so slow. I wonder why. Looks worried, she does. Poor girl. Tired, maybe. I'll just hustle her up a coffee pot and a tray of cakes.'

Emily tapped up the front steps. Aunt Tildy, rustling around, could hear the slow, deliberate steps. What ailed the girl? Didn't sound like she had no more spunk than a flue-lizard. The front door swung wide. Emily stood in the hall, holding to the brass door-knob. Why didn't she come in? Funny girl.

'Emily?' called Aunt Tildy.

Emily shuffled into the parlour, head down.

'Emily! I been waiting for you! There was the darndest fool men just here with a wicker. Tryin' to sell me something I didn't want. Glad you're home. Makes it right cosy — '

Aunt Tildy realized that for a full minute Emily had been staring.

'Emily, what's wrong? Stop starin'. Here, I'll bring you a cup of coffee. There.

'Emily, why you backin' away from me?

'Emily, stop screamin', child! Don't scream, Emily! Don't! You keep screamin' that way, you go crazy. Emily, get up off the floor, get away from that wall. Emily! Stop cringin', child. I won't hurt you!

'Land, if it ain't one thing it's another.

'Emily, what's wrong, child. . .?'

Emily groaned through her hands over her face.

'Child, child,' pleaded Tildy. 'Here, sip this water. Sip it, Emily. Ah, That's it.'

Emily widened her eyes, saw something, then shut them, quivering, pulling into herself. 'Aunt Tildy, Aunt Tildy, Aunt Tildy, Aunt — '
'Stop that!' Tildy slapped her. 'What ails you?'

Emily forced herself to look up again.

She thrust her fingers out. They vanished inside Aunt Tildy.

'What fool notion!' cried Tildy. 'Take your hand away! Take it, I say!'

Emily dropped aside, jerked her head, the golden hair shaking into shiny temblors. 'You're not here, Aunt Tildy. You're gone. I'm dreaming.'

'You're not dreamin'.'

'You're dead!'

'Hush, baby.'

'You can't be here.'

'Lands of Goshen, Emily — '

She took Emily's hand. It passed clean through her. Instantly, Aunt Tildy raged straight up, stomping her foot.

'Why — why,' she muttered angrily. 'That — fibber! That liar! That sneak-thief!' Her thin hands knotted to wiry hard pale fists. 'That dark, dark fiend! He stole it, he stole it! He toted it away, he did, oh he did, he did! Why, I — ' She found no words. Wrath steamed in her. Her pale blue eyes were fire. She sputtered into an indignant silence. Then she turned to Emily. 'Child, get up! I need you. Get up, now!'

Emily lay, shivering.

'Part of me's here!' declared Aunt Tildy. 'By the Lord Harry, what's left will have to do. Momentarily. Fetch my bonnet!'

Emily confessed. 'I'm — scared.'

Tildy planted fists on hips. 'Of me?'

'Yes.'

'Why? I'm no booger! You know me most your life! Now's no time to snivel-sopp. You fetch up on your heels or I'll slap you flat across your nose!'

Emily rose in sobs, stood like something cornered, trying to decide which direction to bolt in.

'Where's your car, Emily?'

'Down at the garage — ma'am.'

'Good.' Aunt Tildy hustled her through the front door. 'Now — ' Her sharp stare poked up and down the streets. 'Which way's the mortuary?'

Emily held to the step rail, fumbling down. 'What're you going to do, Aunt Tildy?'

'Do?' cried Tildy, tottering after her, jowls shaking in a thin, pale fury.

'Why, get my body back, of course! Get my body back! Go on!'

The car roared, Emily clenched to the steering-wheel, staring straight ahead at the curved, rain-wet streets. Aunt Tildy shook her parasol.

'Hurry, child, hurry! Hurry before they squirt juices in my body and dice and cube it the way them pernickety morticians have a habit of doin'.

They cut and sew it so it ain't no good to no one!'

'Oh, Auntie, Auntie, let me go, don't make me drive! It won't do any good, no good at all,' sighed the girl.

'Humph!' was all the old woman would say. 'Humph!'

'Here we are, Auntie.' Emily said, pulling to the curb. She collapsed over the wheel, but Aunt Tildy was already popped from the car and trotting with mincing skirt up the mortuary drive, around behind to where the shiny black hearse was unloading a wicker basket.

'You!' she directed her attack at one of the four men with the wicker.

'Put down that basket!'

The four men paid little attention.

One said, 'Step aside, lady. We're doing our job. Let us do it, please.'

'That's my body tucked in there!' She brandished the parasol.

'That I wouldn't know anything about,' said a second man. 'Please don't block traffic, madame. This thing is heavy.'

'Sir,' she cried, wounded. 'I'll have you know I weigh only one hundred and ten pounds!'

He looked at her casually. 'I'm not interested in your hip measure, lady. I just wanna go home to supper. My wife'll kill me if I'm late.'
The four of them forged ahead, Aunt Tildy in pursuit, down a hall, into a preparations room.

A white-smocked man awaited the wicker's arrival with a rather pleased smile on his long eager-looking face. Aunt Tildy didn't care for the avidity of that face, or the entire personality of the man. The basket was deposited, the four men retreated.

The man in the white smock, evidently a mortician, glanced at Auntie and said:

'Madame, this is no fit place for a gentlewoman.'

'Well,' said Auntie, gratified. 'Glad you feel that way. Them is my sentiments, neat, but I can't convince those fellows. That's exactly what I tried to tell that dark-clothed young man!'

The mortician puzzled. 'What dark-clothed young man is that?'

'The one who came puddlin' around my house, that's who.'

'No one of that description works for us.'

'No matter. As you just so intelligently stated, this is no place for a gentle lady. I don't want me here. I want me home. I want me cookin' ham for Sunday visitors, it's near Easter. I got Emily to feed, sweaters to knit, clocks to wind — '

'You are quite philosophical, and philanthropical, no doubt of it, madame, but I have work. A body has arrived.' This last, he said with apparent relish, and a winnowing of his knives, tubes, jars and instruments.

Tildy bristled. 'You lay so much as a cuticle on that body, I'll thrash you!' Again, the parasol.

He laid her aside like a little old moth. 'George,' he called with a suave gentleness. 'Escort this little lady out, please.'

Aunt Tildy glared at the approaching George.

'Show me your backside, goin' the other way!'

George took her wrists. 'This way, please.'

Tildy extricated herself. Easily. Her flesh sort of — slipped. It even amazed Tildy. Such an unexpected talent to develop at this late day.

'See?' she said, pleased with her ability. 'You can't budge me. I want my body back!'

The mortician opened the wicker lid casually. Then, in a recurrent series of scrutines he realized that the body inside was. . . it seemed. . . could it be?. . . maybe. . . yes. . . no. . . well, uh. . . it just couldn't be, but. . .

'Ah,' he exhaled, abruptly. He turned. His eyes were saucer-wide.

'Madame,' he said, cautiously. 'Eh — this lady here. She is — a — relative — of yours?'

'A very dear relation. Be careful of her.'

'A twin sister, perhaps?' He grasped at a straw of dwindling logic, hopefully.

'No, you fool. Me, do you hear? Me!'

The mortician considered the idea. He shook his head. 'No,' he decided.

'No. Things like this don't happen.' He went on fumbling with his tools.

'Show her away, George. Get help from the others. I can't work with a crank present.'

The four men assembled and converged. Aunt Tildy was a lace fortress, arms crossed in defiance. 'Won't budge,' she said. She repeated this as she was evicted in consecutive moves, like a pawn on a chessboard, from preparations room to slumber room, to hall, to waiting chamber, to funeral parlour, where she made her last fight by sitting down on a chair in the very centre of the vestibule. There were pews going back into grey silence, and a flower smell.

'You can't sit there, mam,' said one of the men. 'That's where the body rests for the service tomorrow.'

'I'm sittin' right plumb here until I get what I want.'

She sat, pale fingers fussing with her fussy throat lace, jaw set, one high-ankled, button-shoe tapping irritated rhythms. If a man got in whopping distance, she gave him a parasol whop. And when they touched her, now, she sort of — slipped away.

Mr. Carrington, Mortuary President, heard the disturbance in his office and came toddling down the aisle to investigate. 'Here, here,' he whispered to all of them, finger to mouth. 'More respect, more respect. What is this? Oh, madame, may I help you?'

She looked him up and down. 'You may.'

'How may I be of service, please?'

'Go in that room back there,' directed Aunt Tildy.

'Yee-ess.'

'And tell that eager young investigator to quit fiddlin' with my body. I'm a maiden lady. My moles, birthmarks, scars and other bric-a-brac, including the turn of my ankle, are my own secret. I don't want him pryin' and probin', cuttin' it or hurtin' it any way.'

This was vague to Mr. Carrington, who hadn't correlated bodies yet. He looked at her, in blank helplessness.

'He's got me in there on his table, like a pigeon ready to be drawn and stuffed!' she told him.

Mr. Carrington hustled off to check. After fifteen minutes of waiting silence and horrified arguing, comparing notes with the mortician behind closed doors, Carrington returned, three shades whiter.

'Well?' said Auntie.

'Uh — that is. Most irregular. You can't — sit — there.'

'Can't I?'

Carrington dropped his glasses, picked them up. 'You're making it difficult for us.'

'I am!' raged Auntie. 'Saint Vitus in the mornin'! Looky here. Mister Blood and Bones or whatever, you tell that — '

'But he's already pumping the blood from the body.'

'What!'

'Yes, yes, I assure you, yes. So, you just go away, now, there's nothing to be done. The blood's running and soon the body'll be all filled with nice fresh formaldehyde.' He laughed nervously. 'Our mortician is also performing a brief autopsy to determine cause of death.'

Auntie jumped on to her feet, burning. 'Cuttin' me, is he?'

'Y-yes.'

'He can't do that; only coroners are allowed to do that!'

'Well, we sometimes allow a little — '

'March straight in and tell that Cut-'em-up to pump all that fine New England blue blood right back into that fine-skinned body, and if he's taken anything out, for him to attach it back in so it'll function proper, and then turn that body, fresh as paint, over into my keepin'! You hear!'

'There's nothing I can do. Nothing.'

'All right. Tell you what. I'm settin' here the next two hunderd year. You hear? And every time anyone comes near I'll spit ectoplasm right squirt up their left nostril!'

Carrington groped that thought around his weakening mind and emitted a groan. 'You'll dislocate our business. You wouldn't do that.'

Auntie smiled pleasantly. 'Wouldn't I?'

Carrington ran up the dark aisle. In the distance he made a series of phone-calls. Half an hour later cars roared up in front of the mortuary. Three vice-presidents of the mortuary came down the aisle with their hysterical president.

'What seems to be the trouble?'

Auntie told them with a few well-chosen infernalities.

They held a conference, meanwhile notifying the mortician to discontinue his homework, at least until such time as an agreement was reached. The mortician walked from his chamber and stood smiling amiably, smoking a big black cigar.

Auntie stared at the cigar.

'Where'd you put the ashes?' she cried, in horror.

The mortician only grinned imperturbably and puffed.

The conference broke up.

'Madame, in all fairness, you wouldn't force us out on the street to continue our services, would you?'

Auntie scanned the vultures. 'Oh, I wouldn't mind at all.'

Carrington wiped sweat from his jowls. 'You can have your body back.'

'Ha!' shouted Auntie. Then, with caution: 'Intact?'

'Intact.'

'No formaldehyde?'

'No formaldehyde.'

'Blood in it?'

'Blood, my God, yes, blood, if only you'll take it and go!'

A prim nod. 'Fair enough. Fix 'er up. It's a deal!'

Carrington snapped fingers at the mortician. 'Don't stand there, you mental incompetent. Fix it up!'

'And be careful with that cigar butt,' warned Tildy.

'Easy, easy,' said Aunt Tildy. 'Put the wicker basket down to the floor where I can step in it.'

She didn't look at the body much. Her only comment was, 'Natural-lookin'.' She let herself fall back into the wicker.

A biting sensation of arctic coldness, a great unlikely nausea and a giddy whorling. Like two drops of matter fusing. Water trying to seep into

concrete. Slow to do. Hard. Like a butterfly trying to squirm back into its discarded dry husk of flinty chrysalis!

The mortuary people watched Aunt Tildy's wriggles. Mr. Carrington was deeply concerned. He wrung his fingers and tried to assist with boosting and grunting moves of his hands and arms. The mortician, frankly sceptical, watched with idle, amused eyes.

Seeping into cold, long granite. Seeping into a frozen and ancient statue. Squeezing all the way.

'Come alive, damn ye!' shouted Aunt Tildy to herself. 'Raise up a bit.'

The body half rose, rustling in the dry wicker.

'Find your legs, woman!'

The body grabbed up, blindly groping.

'See!' shouted Aunt Tildy.

Light entered the webbed blind eyes.

'Feel!' urged Aunt Tildy.

The body felt the room warmth, the sudden reality of the preparations table on which to lean, panting.

'Move!'

The body took a creakingly unsteady step.

'Hear!' she snapped.

The noises of the place came into the dull ears. The harsh, expectant breath of the mortician, shaken; the whimpering Mr. Carrington; her own crackling voice.

'Walk!' cried she.

The body walked.

'Think!' Auntie said.

The old brain thought.

'Now — speak!' she ordered.

The body spoke, bowing to the morticians:

'Much obliged. Thank you.'

'Now,' she said, finally. 'Cry!'

And she began to cry tears of utter happiness.

And now, any afternoon about four, if you want to visit Aunt Tildy, you just walk around to her antique shop and rap on the door. There's a big black funeral wreath on the door. But don't mind that. Aunt Tildy left it there. She has some sense of humour. You rap on the door. It's double-barred and triple-locked, and when you rap her voice shrills out at you: 'Is that the man in black?'

And you laugh and say no, no, it's only me, Aunt Tildy. And she laughs and says, 'Come in, quick!' and she whips the door open and slams it shut behind you so no man in black can ever slip in with you. Then she escorts you in and pours you your cup of coffee and shows you her latest knitted sweater. She's not as fast as she used to be, and can't see as good, but she gets on.

'And if you're 'specially good,' Aunt Tildy declares, setting her coffee-cup to one side, 'I'll give you a little treat.'

'What's that?' visitors will ask.

'This,' says Auntie, pleased with her little uniqueness, her little joke.

Then with modest moves of her fingers she will unfasten the white lace at her neck and chest and for a brief moment show what lies beneath.

The long blue scar where the autopsy was neatly sewn together.

'Not bad sewin' for a man,' she allows. 'Oh, some more coffee? There.'

The end