

Touched with Fire, Ray Bradbury

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They stood in the blazing sunlight for a long while, looking at the bright faces of their old-fashioned railroad watches, while the shadows tilted beneath them, swaying, and the perspiration ran out under their porous summer hats.

When they uncovered their heads to mop their lined and pinkened brows, their hair was white and soaked through, like something that had been out of the light for years. One of the men commented that his shoes felt like two loaves of baked bread and then, sighing warmly, added:

‘Are you positive this is the right tenement?’

The second old man, Foxe by name, nodded, as if any quick motion might make him catch fire by friction alone. ‘I saw this woman every day for three days. She’ll show up. If she’s still alive, that is. Wait till you see her, Shaw. Lord! what a case.’

‘Such an odd business,’ said Shaw. ‘If people knew they’d think us Peeping Toms, doddering old fools. Lord, I feel self-conscious standing here.’

Foxe leaned on his cane. ‘Let me do all the talking if—hold on! There she is!’ He lowered his voice. ‘Take a slow look as she comes out.’

The tenement front door slammed viciously. A dumpy woman stood at the top of the thirteen porch steps glancing this way and that with angry jerkings of her eyes. Jamming a plump hand in her purse, she seized some crumpled dollar bills, plunged down the steps brutally, and set off down the street in a charge. Behind her, several heads peered from apartment windows above, summoned by her crashing of the door.

‘Come on,’ whispered Foxe. ‘Here we go to the butcher’s.’

The woman flung open a butchershop door, rushed in. The two old men had a glimpse of a mouth sticky with raw lipstick. Her eyebrows were like mustaches over her squinting, always suspicious eyes. Abreast of the butchershop, they heard her voice already screaming inside.

‘I want a good cut of meat. Let’s see what you got hidden to take home for yourself!’

The butcher stood silently in his bloody-fingerprinted frock, his hands empty. The two old men entered behind the woman and pretended to admire a pink loaf of fresh-ground sirloin.

‘Them lambchops look sickly!’ cried the woman. ‘What’s the price on brains?’

The butcher told her in a low dry voice.

‘Well, weigh me a pound of liver!’ said the woman. ‘Keep your thumbs off!’

The butcher weighed it out, slowly.

‘Hurry up!’ snapped the woman.

The butcher now stood with his hands out of sight below the counter.

‘Look,’ whispered Foxe. Shaw leaned back a trifle to peer below the case.

In one of the butcher’s bloody hands, empty before, a silvery meat ax was now clenched tightly, relaxed, clenched tightly, relaxed. The butcher’s eyes were blue and dangerously serene above the white porcelain counter while the woman yelled into those eyes and that pink self-contained face.

‘Now do you believe?’ whispered Foxe. ‘She really needs our help.’

They stared at the raw red cube-steaks for a long time, noticing all the little dents and marks where it had been hit, ten dozen times, by a steel mallet.

The braying continued at the grocer’s and the dime store, with the two old men following at a respectful distance.

‘Mrs Death-Wish,’ said Mr Foxe quietly. ‘It’s like watching a two-yearold run out on a battlefield. Any moment, you say, she’ll hit a mine: bang! Get the temperature just right, too much humidity, everyone itching, sweating, irritable. Along’ll come this fine lady, whining, shrieking. And so good-by. Well. Shaw, do we start business?’

‘You mean just walk up to her?’ Shaw was stunned by his own suggestion. ‘Oh, but we’re not really going to do this, are we? I thought it was sort of a hobby. People, habits, customs, et cetera. It’s been fun. But actually mixing in—? We’ve better things to do.’

‘Have we?’ Foxe nodded down the street to where the woman ran out in front of cars, making them stop with a great squall of brakes, hornblowing, and cursing. ‘Are we Christians? Do we let her feed herself subconsciously to the lions? Or do we convert her?’

‘Convert her?’

‘To love, to serenity, to a longer life. Look at her. Doesn’t want to live any more. Deliberately aggravates people. One day soon, someone’ll favor her, with a hammer, or strychnine. She’s been going down for the third time a long while now.

When you’re drowning, you get nasty, grab at people, scream. Let’s have lunch and lend a hand, eh? Otherwise, our victim will run on until she finds her murderer.’

Shaw stood with the sun driving him into the boiling white sidewalk, and it seemed for a moment the street tilted vertically, became a cliff down which the woman fell toward a blazing sky. At last he shook his head.

‘You’re right,’ he said. ‘I wouldn’t want her on my conscience.’

The sun burnt the paint from the tenement fronts, bleached the air raw and turned the gutter-waters to vapor by mid-afternoon when the old men, numbed and evaporated, stood in the inner passageway of a house that funneled bakery air from front to back in a searing torrent. When they spoke it was the submerged, muffled talk of men in steam rooms, preposterously tired and remote.

The front door opened. Foxe stopped a boy who carried a well-mangled loaf of bread. ‘Son, we’re looking for the woman who gives the door an awful slam when she goes out.’

‘Oh, her?’ The boy ran upstairs, calling back. ‘Mrs Shrike!’

Foxe grabbed Shaw’s arm. ‘Lord, Lord! It can’t be true!’

‘I want to go home,’ said Shaw.

‘But there it is!’ said Foxe, incredulous, tapping his cane on the roomindex in the lobby. ‘Mr and Mrs Albert Shrike, 331 upstairs! Husband’s a longshoreman, big hulking brute, comes home dirty. Saw them out on Sunday, her jabbering, him never speaking, never looking at her. Oh, come on, Shaw.’

‘It’s no use,’ said Shaw. ‘You can’t help people like her unless they want to be helped. That’s the first law of mental health. You know it. I know it. If you get in her way, she’ll trample you. Don’t be a fool.’

‘But who’s to speak for her—and people like her? Her husband? Her friends? The grocer, the butcher? They’d sing at her wake! Will they tell her she needs a psychiatrist? Does she know it? No. Who knows it? We do. Well, then, you don’t keep vital information like that from the victim, do you?’

Shaw took off his sopping hat and gazed bleakly into it. ‘Once, in biology class, long ago, our teacher asked if we thought we could remove a frog’s nervous system, intact, with a scalpel.

Take out the whole delicate antennalike structure, with all its little pink thistles and half-invisible ganglions. Impossible, of course. The nervous system’s so much a part of the frog there’s no way to pull it like a hand from a green glove. You’d destroy the frog, doing it.

Well, that’s Mrs Shrike. There’s no way to operate on a souring ganglion. Bile is in the vitreous humor of her mad little elephant eyes. You might as well try to get all the saliva out of her mouth forever. It’s very sad. But I think we’ve gone too far already.’

‘True,’ said Foxe patiently, earnestly, nodding. ‘But all I want to do is post a warning. Drop a little seed in her subconscious. Tell her. “You’re a murderee, a victim looking for a place to happen.” One tiny seed I want to plant in her head and hope it’ll sprout and flower. A very faint, very poor hope that before it’s too late, she’ll gather her courage and go see a psychiatrist!’

‘It’s too hot to talk.’

‘All the more reason to act! More murders are committed at ninetytwo degrees Fahrenheit than any other temperature. Over one hundred, it’s too hot to move. Under ninety, cool enough to survive.

But right at ninety-two degrees lies the apex of irritability, everything is itches and hair and sweat and cooked pork. The brain becomes a rat rushing around a red-hot maze. The least thing, a word, a look, a sound, the drop of a hair and—irritable murder. Irritable murder, there’s a pretty and terrifying phrase for you. Look at that hall thermometer, eighty-nine degrees. Crawling up toward ninety, itching up toward ninety-one, sweating toward ninety-two an hour, two hours from now. Here’s the first flight of stairs. We can rest on each landing. Up we go!’

The two old men moved in the third-floor darkness.

‘Don’t check the numbers,’ said Foxe. ‘Let’s guess which apartment is hers.’

Behind the last door a radio exploded, the ancient paint shuddered and flaked softly onto the worn carpet at their feet. The men watched the entire door jitter with vibration in its grooves.

They looked at each other and nodded grimly.

Another sound cut like an ax through the paneling; a woman, shrieking to someone across town on a telephone.

‘No phone necessary. She should just open her window and yell.’

Foxe rapped.

The radio blasted out the rest of its song, the voice bellowed. Foxe rapped again, and tested the knob. To his horror the door got free of his grasp and floated swiftly inward, leaving them like actors trapped on-stage when a curtain rises too soon.

‘Oh, no!’ cried Shaw.

They were buried in a flood of sound. It was like standing in the spillway of a dam and pulling the gate-lever. Instinctively, the old men raised their hands, wincing as if the sound were pure blazing sunlight that burnt their eyes.

The woman (it was indeed Mrs Shrike!) stood at a wall phone, saliva flying from her mouth at an incredible rate. She showed all of her large white teeth, chunking off her monologue, nostrils flared, a vein in her wet forehead ridged up, pumping, her free hand flexing and unflexing itself. Her eyes were clenched shut as she yelled:

‘Tell that damned son-in-law of mine I won’t see him, he’s a lazy bum!’

Suddenly the woman snapped her eyes wide, some animal instinct having felt rather than heard or seen an intrusion. She continued yelling into the phone, meanwhile piercing her visitors with a glance forged of the coldest steel. She yelled for a full minute longer, then slammed down the receiver and said, without taking a breath: ‘Well?’

The two men moved together for protection. Their lips moved.

‘Speak up!’ cried the woman.

‘Would you mind,’ said Foxe, ‘turning the radio down?’

She caught the word ‘radio’ by lip reading. Still glaring at them out of her sunburnt face, she slapped the radio without looking at it, as one slaps a child that cries all day every day and has become an unseen pattern in life. The radio subsided.

‘I’m not buyin’ anything!’

She ripped a dog-eared packet of cheap cigarettes like it was a bone with meat on it, snapped one of the cigarettes in her smeared mouth and lit it, sucking greedily on the smoke, jetting it through her thin nostrils until she was a feverish dragon confronting them in a fire-clouded room. ‘I got work to do. Make your pitch!’

They looked at the magazines spilled like great catches of bright-colored fish on the linoleum floor, the unwashed coffee cup near the broken rocking chair, the tilted, greasy thumb-marked lamps, the smudged windowpanes, the dishes piled in the sink under a steadily dripping, dripping faucet, the cobwebs floating like dead skin in the ceiling corners, and over all of it the thickened smell of life lived too much, too long, with the window down.

They saw the wall thermometer.

Temperature: ninety degrees Fahrenheit.

They gave each other a half-startled look.

‘I’m Mr Foxe, this is Mr Shaw. We’re retired insurance salesmen. We still sell occasionally, to supplement our retirement fund. Most of the time, however, we’re taking it easy and—’

‘You tryin’ to sell me insurance!’ She cocked her head at them through the cigarette smoke.

‘There’s no money connected with this, no.’

‘Keep talking,’ she said.

‘I hardly know how to begin. May we sit down?’ He looked about and decided there wasn’t a thing in the room he would trust himself to sit on. ‘Never mind.’ He saw she was about to bellow again, so went on swiftly.

‘We retired after forty years of seeing people from nursery to cemetery gate, you might say. In that time we’d formulated certain opinions. Last year, sitting in the park talking, we put two and two together. We realized that many people didn’t have to die so young. With the correct investigation, a new type of Customer’s Information might be provided as a sideline by insurance companies…’

‘I’m not sick,’ said the woman.

‘Oh, but you are!’ cried Mr Foxe, and then put two fingers to his mouth in dismay.

‘Don’t tell me what I am!’ she cried.

Foxe plunged headlong. ‘Let me make it clear. People die every day, psychologically speaking. Some part of them gets tired. And that small part tries to kill off the entire person. For example—’ He looked about and seized on his first evidence with what amounted to a vast relief. ‘There! That light bulb in your bathroom, hung right over the tub on frayed wire. Someday you’ll slip, make a grab and—pfft!’

Mrs Albert J. Shrike squinted at the light bulb in the bathroom. ‘So?’

‘People’—Mr Foxe warmed to his subject, while Mr Shaw fidgeted, his face now flushed, now dreadfully pale, edged toward the door—‘people, like cars, need their brakes checked; their emotional brakes, do you see? Their lights, their batteries, their approaches and responses to life.’

Mrs Shrike snorted. ‘Your two minutes are up. I haven’t learned a damned thing.’

Mr Foxe blinked, first at her, then at the sun burning mercilessly through the dusty windowpanes. Perspiration was running in the soft lines of his face. He chanced a look at the wall thermometer.

‘Ninety-one,’ he said.

‘What’s eating you, pop?’ asked Mrs Shrike.

‘I beg your pardon.’ He stared in fascination at the red-hot line of mercury firing up the small glass vent across the room. ‘Sometimes—sometimes we all make wrong turnings. Our choice of marriage partners. A wrong job. No money. Illness. Migraine headaches. Glandular deficiencies. Dozens of little prickly, irritable things. Before you know it, you’re taking it out on everyone everywhere.’

She was watching his mouth as if he were talking a foreign language: she scowled, she squinted, she tilted her head, her cigarette smoldering in one plump hand.

‘We run about screaming, making enemies.’ Foxe swallowed and glanced away from her. ‘We make people want to see us—gone—sick—dead, even. People want to hit us, knock us down, shoot us. It’s all unconscious, though. You see?’

God, it’s hot in here, he thought. If there were only one window open. Just one. Just one window open.

Mrs Shrike’s eyes were widening, as if to allow in everything he said.

‘Some people are not only accident-prones, which means they want to punish themselves physically, for some crime, usually a petty immorality they think they’ve long forgotten. But their subconscious puts them in dangerous situations, makes them jaywalk, makes them—’ He hesitated and the sweat dripped from his chin. ‘Makes them ignore frayed electric cords over bathtubs—they’re potential victims.

It is marked on their faces, hidden like—like tattoos, you might say, on the inner rather than the outer skin. A murderer passing one of these accident-prones, these wishersafter-death, would see the invisible markings, turn, and follow them, instinctively, to the nearest alley.

With luck, a potential victim might not happen to cross the tracks of a potential murderer for fifty years. Then—one afternoon—fate! These people, these death-prones, touch all the wrong nerves in passing strangers; they brush the murder in all our breasts.’

Mrs Shrike mashed her cigarette in a dirty saucer, very slowly.

Foxe shifted his cane from one trembling hand to the other. ‘So it was that a year ago we decided to try to find people who needed help. These are always the people who don’t even know they need help, who’d never dream of going to a psychiatrist. At first, I said, we’ll make dry runs.

Shaw was always against it, save as a hobby, a harmless little quiet thing between ourselves. I suppose you’d say I’m a fool. Well, we’ve just completed a year of dry runs. We watched two men, studied their environmental factors, their work, marriages, at a discreet distance.

None of our business, you say? But each time, the men came to a bad end. One killed in a bar-room. Another pushed out a window. A woman we studied, run down by a streetcar. Coincidence? What about that old man accidentally poisoned? Didn’t turn on the bathroom light one night.

What was there in his mind that wouldn’t let him turn the light on? What made him move in the dark and drink medicine in the dark and die in the hospital next day, protesting he wanted nothing but to live? Evidence, evidence, we have it, we have it. Two dozen cases.

Coffins nailed to a good half of them in that little time. No more dry runs; it’s time for action, preventative use of data. Time to work with people, make friends before the undertaker slips in the side door.’

Mrs Shrike stood as if he had struck her on the head, quite suddenly, with a large weight. Then just her blurred lips moved. ‘And you came here?’

‘Well—’

‘You’ve been watching me?’

‘We only—’

‘Following me?’

‘In order to—’

‘Get out!’ she said.

‘We can—’

‘Get out!’ she said.

‘If you’ll only listen—’

‘Oh, I said this would happen,’ whispered Shaw, shutting his eyes.

‘Dirty old men, get out!’ she shouted.

‘There’s no money involved.’

‘I’ll throw you out, I’ll throw you out!’ she shrieked, clenching her fists, gritting her teeth. Her face colored insanely. ‘Who are you, dirty old grandmas, coming her, spying, you old cranks!’ she yelled. She seized the straw hat from Mr Foxe’s head; he cried out: she tore the lining from it, cursing. ‘Get out, get out, get out, get out!’ She hurled it to the floor. She crunched one heel through the middle. She kicked it. ‘Get out, get out!’

‘Oh, but you need us!’ Foxe stared in dismay at the hat as she swore at him in a language that turned corners, blazing, that flew in the air like great searing torches. The woman knew every language and every word in every language. She spoke with fire and alcohol and smoke.

‘Who do you think you are? God? God and the Holy Ghost, passing on people, snooping, prying, you old jerks, you old dirty-minded grandmas! You, you—’ She gave them further names, names that forced them toward the door in shock, recoiling. She gave them a long vile list of names without pausing for breath. Then she stopped, gasped, trembled, heaved in a great suction of air, and started a further list of ten dozen even viler names.

‘See here!’ said Foxe, stiffening.

Shaw was out the door, pleading with his partner to come along, it was over and done, it was as he expected, they were fools, they were everything she said they were, oh, how embarrassing!

‘Old maid!’ shouted the woman.

‘I’ll thank you to keep a civil tongue.’

‘Old maid, old maid!’

Somehow this was worse than all the really vile names.

Foxe swayed, his mouth clapped open, shut, open, shut.

‘Old woman!’ she cried. ‘Woman, woman, woman!’

He was in a blazing yellow jungle. The room was drowned in fire, it clenched upon him, the furniture seemed to shift and whirl about, the sunlight shot through the rammed-shut windows, firing the dust, which leaped up from the rug in angry sparks when a fly buzzed a crazy spiral from nowhere; her mouth, a feral red thing, licked the air with all the obscenities collected just behind it in a lifetime, and beyond her on the baked brown wallpaper the thermometer said ninety-two, and he looked again and it said ninety-two, and still the woman screamed like the wheels of a train scraping around a vast iron curve of track; fingernails down a blackboard, and steel across marble. ‘Old maid! Old maid! Old maid!’

Foxe drew his arm back, cane clenched in fist, very high, and struck.

‘No!’ cried Shaw in the doorway.

But the woman had slipped and fallen aside, gibbering, clawing the floor. Foxe stood over her with a look of positive disbelief on his face. He looked at his arm and his wrist and his hand and his fingers, each in turn, through a great invisible glaring hot wall of crystal that enclosed him.

He looked at the cane as if it was an easily seen and incredible exclamation point come out of nowhere to the center of the room. His mouth stayed open, the dust fell in silent embers, dead. He felt the blood drop from his face as if a small door had banged wide into his stomach. ‘I—’

She frothed.

Scrabbling about, every part of her seemed a separate animal. Her arms and legs, her hands, her head, each was a lopped-off bit of some creature wild to return to itself, but blind to the proper way of making that return. Her mouth still gushed out her sickness with words and sounds that were not even faintly words. It had been in her a long time, a long long time.

Foxe looked upon her, in a state of shock, himself. Before today, she had spat her venom out, here, there, another place. Now he had loosed the flood of a lifetime and he felt in danger of drowning here. He sensed someone pulling him by his coat.

He saw the door sills pass on either side. He heard the cane fall and rattle like a thin bone far away from his hand, which seemed to have been stung by some terrible unseen wasp. And then he was out, walking mechanically, down through the burning tenement, between the scorched walls. Her voice crashed like a guillotine down the stair. ‘Get out! Get out! Get out!’

Fading like the wail of a person dropped down an open well into darkness.

At the bottom of the last flight, near the street door. Foxe turned himself loose from this other man here, and for a long moment leaned against the wall, his eyes wet, able to do nothing but moan.

His hands, while he did this, moved in the air to find the lost cane, moved on his head, touched at his moist eyelids, amazed, and fluttered away. They sat on the bottom hall step for ten minutes in silence, drawing sanity into their lungs with every shuddering breath. Finally Mr Foxe looked over at Mr Shaw, who had been staring at him in wonder and fright for the full ten minutes.

‘Did you see what I did? Oh, oh, that was close. Close. Close.’ He shook his head. ‘I’m a fool. That poor, poor woman. She was right.’

‘There’s nothing to be done.’

‘I see that now. It had to fall on me.’

‘Here, wipe your face. That’s better.’

‘Do you think she’ll tell Mr Shrike about us?’

‘No, no.’

‘Do you think we could—’

‘Talk to him?’

They considered this and shook their heads. They opened the front door to a gush of furnace heat and were almost knocked down by a huge man who strode between them.

‘Look where you’re going!’ he cried.

They turned and watched the man move ponderously, in fiery darkness, one step at a time, up into the tenement house, a creature with the ribs of a mastodon and the head of an unshorn lion, with great beefed arms, irritably hairy, painfully sunburnt.

The face they had seen briefly as he shouldered past was a sweating, raw, sunblistered pork face, salt droplets under the red eyes, dripping from the chin; great smears of perspiration stained the man’s armpits, coloring his tee-shirt to the waist.

They shut the tenement door gently.

‘That’s him,’ said Mr Foxe. ‘That’s the husband.’

They stood in the little store across from the tenement. It was five-thirty, the sun tilting down the sky, the shadows the color of hot summer grapes under the rare few trees and in the alleys.

‘What was it, hanging out of the husband’s back pocket?’

‘Longshoreman’s hook. Steel. Sharp, heavy-looking. Like those claws one-armed men used to wear on the end of their stumps, years ago.’

Mr Foxe did not speak.

‘What’s the temperature?’ asked Mr Foxe, a minute later, as if he were too tired to turn his head to look.

‘Store thermometer still reads ninety-two. Ninety-two right on the nose.’

Foxe sat on a packing crate, making the least motion to hold an orange soda bottle in his fingers. ‘Cool off,’ he said. ‘Yes, I need an orange pop very much, right now.’

They sat there in the furnace, looking up at one special tenement window for a long time, waiting, waiting…

The end