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IT BURNS ME UP!

"Don't knock a man when he's down," they say. . . . But my cold-blooded visitors paid no heed, as they laughed and wondered how I could talk to Saint Peter—with my throat cut from ear to ear!

The reporters are buzzing like a hive of tipped bees. . . .

By RAY
BRADBURY

I AM lying here in the very center of the room and I am not mad, I am not angry, I am not perturbed. In the first place, in order for a man to be perturbed, angry, mad, he must recognize some stimulus from outside which touches his nerves. The nerves flash a message to the brain. The brain kicks back quick orders to all parts of the body: be angry, be mad, be disturbed! Eyelashes, pull back from eyes, let eyes protrude, muscles work! Iris dilate! Mouth pull back tight from teeth! Ears blush! Brow furrow!

Heart beat! Blood surge! Get angry, get perturbed, get mad!

But my eyelashes will not pull back. My eyes simply stare vacantly at a colorless, dark ceiling, my heart lies cold, my mouth is limp, my fingers are lax. I do not madden. I do not anger or perturb. And yet I have every reason to be irritated.

The detectives are swaggering about my house, swearing in the rooms, honking in the night, drinking from bottles in the alley. Reporters are flashing quick bulbs at my re-

laxed body. The flash eyes are glinting into electrical powder, exploding. The neighbors are peering in at the windows. My wife is lying in a chair, turned away from me, and instead of crying she is very glad.

You understand, then, I have reason to be mad. But no matter how hard I try to be incensed, fuming, swearing, I cannot. Nothing responds. There is only an encompassing cold weightlessness over and through me.

I am dead.

I lie here, sleeping, and these people are the fragments of my bloodless dreaming. They move about me, as carrion-eaters over a decaying carcass, carnivores lusting on the hot spilled blood of killing at night, taking that blood and respilling it upon the pages of tabloid papers. But somehow in the transition from body to thrashing presses, the blood has turned an ungodly black.

A little blood will ink a million print-drums. A little blood is chemical enough to drive ten million presses. A little blood is adrenalin enough to pound thirty million literate, reading hearts.

Tonight, I have died. Tomorrow morning I will die again in thirty million brains, caught like a fly in a web, sucked dry by the multi-tentacled public, and flushed on through the transits of their minds to be replaced by:

HEIRESS MARRIES DUKE!
INCOME TAX INCREASE DUE!
COAL MINERS STRIKE!

So here are the vultures circling over me. Here is the coroner, casually examining my vitals, the hyena newsmen digging at the dead thoughts of my love. And here the fauns and the goats with synthetic lion hearts, peering timidly in the window, but safely removed from terror, watching the carnivores stalk about, pruning their manes.

Perhaps my wife is cleverest of them all. She resembles nothing more than a small soft, dark leopard whiskering and licking itself, pleased with its actions, crouched within the chair's patterned inclosure.

The detective immediately overhead now, like a gigantic lion moving in that world of live people, is a large-lipped man. His lips are vised about a long smoking cigar, and he talks with that vise, his teeth gleaming in amber flashes. Once in awhile he drops grey ash on my coat. He is talking:

"Well, so he's dead. So we talk to *her* for an hour, two hours, three, four, and what do we get? Nothing! Hell, we can't stay here all night! My wife'll kill me! I'm never home nights anymore. More damn murders."

The coroner, so brisk, so efficient, his fingers like inquisitive calipers, measures my circumference, my diameter. Is there anything

but the purest professional interest behind his slanted, sad green eyes? He lifts his head at an imperious angle and makes his speech importantly:

"Died quickly. That knife certainly did things to his throat. And then, who ever did it stabbed him three times in the chest. A very nice job. Impressively bloody."

The detective jerks his bronze-haired head at my wife, wincing, "And she ain't got a blood-speck on her! How you figger that?"

"What does *she* say?" asks the coroner.

"She *don't* say. She just plumps there crooning to herself and singing, 'I won't spill till I see my lawyer.' Honest to God!" The detective can't fathom the ways of cat women. But, lying here, I can.

"That's all she'll say. 'I won't spill till I see my lawyer' over and over, like a damn-fool nursery rhyme."

THERE is a body scuffle at the door that directs all attentions, immediately. A handsome, finely-muscled reporter is wrestling to get in.

"Hey!" The detective pushes out his cliff of chest. He bites the cigar fiercely. "What-in-ell goes on?"

A cop face pokes in, hot, struggling. "This gink wants in, boss!"

"Who in hell does he think *he* is?" asks the detective.

The reporter's voice from a distance. . . "Carlton of the *Tribune*. H. J. Randolph sent me."

The detective blows up. "Kelly, you fool! Let the guy in! Randolph and I went to school together! Sure!"

"Ha, *ha!*" says the coroner, dead-pan.

The detective shoots him a hot glance, while the officer Kelly gives way and the reporter Carlton strides sweating inside.

"I had to get in," laughs Carlton. "Or it was my job."

"Hello, Carlton," the detective laughs again. "Pull up a corpse and sit down."

That is a joke. Everybody laughs, except my wife who is curled in a feminine S within the chair arms, contentedly licking her lips like a fed cat.

The other reporters resent Carlton's entrance. They say nothing. Carlton looks at me with his baby-blue eyes:

"Well, a self-surgery! Ear to ear! How will he talk to Saint Peter in that condition?"

The coroner is proud. "Oh, I will sew him up new as paint. I am pretty good at fixing stuff like that. Comes from long practice."

Carlton rushes on, ignoring the coroner, intrigued with scribbling heiroglyphics on papers, shooting questions. He grins while scribbling. "Hotsy-totsy. Love nest, maybe. All the trimmings. God, he looks like Christ-

mas, don't he? Green around the gills and big red ribbons of blood tied in coagulated bows."

Even the detective cannot stomach this and coughs a little. For the first time my wife doesn't look calm and cool as cream in her chair. It is momentary. It passes. Again she adjusts the rim of her chartreuse skirt over her curvaceous legs, blinking at the new reporter as if to fan his attention to flame.

But now the reporter is kneeling at the altar of my desecrated flesh. A cold marble altar, exquisitely carved by the original hands of God, and only recently recarved by—someone.

Mrs. McLeod, from next door, is looking through the south window from outside, on fat tiptoe, her shining grey eyes hippopotamus-like in the night. Her voice is vague, and she is shivering on purpose:

"Wait until I write Susan in Springfield. Will she be jealous. My very own mysterious murder in my own front yard, almost. Who would have thought we'd have things like this in *our* neighborhood? I tell you, though, Anna, come look—. See, that's the detective, that man with the fat under his chin. He don't look like a detective to me, does he to you? He looks like a pot-beer, a villain. Now, take that young reporter guy, he looks just like Philo Vance, only younger. I bet he'll be the one who really solves the case. But they never get the credit, that's the way. Just look at that woman over there in the corner. I bet she was his mistress, not his wife—"

"Get away from the window, lady!"

"Well, I guess I got a right to look in!"

"Lady, move along!"

"Young man, I own this lawn right up to the window. This is my house! I rented it to Mr. Jameson myself."

"Lady, move along!"

"Young man—"

That will do, Mrs. McLeod, that will do for a long time.

NOW, back to the people in the room.

The reporter, Carlton, is now attracted as a planet is attracted to the sun, by my wife. He is darting questions at her, and she is deliberately stalling him. The reporter is fast, and my wife is languid, heavy-lidded and easy-going. She will not be pushed, pell-melled into anything. She will simply have her say. She says it, purringly: "I came home from the nightclub and there he was lying on the floor, staring at the ceiling. That is all I know."

The other reporters scribble, too. They had not gotten a thing from her, until handsome Carlton showed up. Carlton cracks back at her, "You sing at the nightclub Bomba?"

"Yes. I'm a very good singer. I can hit a C above high C if you want. Once I had a chance with the Metropolitan Opera Company. But I didn't consider it; I don't like them."

The coroner has an opinion of this chatter. He does not express it. But he has the same expression on his face that I once had. The coroner and the detective are both irked because the limelight has swiveled from them and their stage to this little chattering divertissement between man and woman. The detective especially is annoyed because he was unable to pry anything out of my wife except her sing-song pleading for a lawyer and now this young reporter—

Somebody outside hoists a small girl up to the window. She is framed in it momentarily.

"Look, baby, you may never see anything like that—"

"Oh, mama, what's wrong with that man?"

"Move along, lady, please. I just chased a couple people away, and I'm tired. I been on my feet all evening. Move away—"

"Oh, mama!"

I am now immortal! Caught in that child's mind I shall be dead forevermore, and on dark nights I will stride drunkenly through the shivering corridors of her body. And she will waken shrieking, ripping the bedclothes apart. Someday her husband will feel her red fingernails in his fleshy arm, and that will be me, in the middle-dark, reaching out a constricting claw to clutch again at life!

"Can it, *can* it!" suggests the detective, glaring hotly at the reporter, Carlton. "I'm the one who interviews her! Not *you*, bozo!"

The lips of Carlton go down. He opens his hands and shrugs slightly, "But you want a good report for the paper, Captain, don't you? With pictures? Sure you do. And I got to get details."

He is getting the details fine. My wife has a thirty-three bust, twenty-eight waist, thirty-one hips. These details are being scribbled on a brain-pad somewhere within the reporter. Remind him, someone, to call her up after the funeral.

The coroner clears his throat. "Now, about this body—"

Yeah, for God's sake, gentlemen, let's get back to me. What am I lying here for?

Carlton snaps his voice like snapping his thin fingers, "You had a lot of men tagging after you, didn't you, madame?"

My wife lids her eyes and unlids them. "Yes, I've always been popular. Couldn't help it, I guess. He—" she shakes her head at me, "he never seemed to mind the other men tagging at my heels. It sort of upheld his judgment in marrying a—thoroughbred."

The coroner quickly jabs my ribs in some medical joke. He busies himself over me to

keep from snorting out a laugh at her choice of words.

The other reporters are now buzzing like a hive of tipped bees. My wife would not talk for *them*, but perhaps there is a provocative angle to Carlton's body, perhaps there is something about his look or his lips or the cast of his shoulders . . . anyway, the reporters are angry, "Come off it, Carlton, let us have a try!"

Carlton turns to the detective. "Who did the killing, captain?"

"We're rounding up all her boyfriends," says the detective intelligently, nodding, thinking it over.

Carlton nods, too, and half-listening, looking sidewise and gleaming at my wife, checks his notes solemnly, salutes my cold body and marches across the room. "Thanks, thanks, thanks, I'll be right back. Want to phone a call. Keep up the good work." To me, grinning, "Don't wait up for me, darling."

Slam. The door closes.

"WELL," sighs the detective, "we've done all we can here. Fingerprints. Clues. Photographs. Grillings. I guess we can let the body—" He stops, flushing, giving way to the coroner, who, after all, has the right to make his little official announcements.

The coroner acknowledges this courtesy and says, after a due period of serious thought, "I think we can take the body away now. Yes."

One of the remaining reporters pipes, "Say, Sherlock, you think this is a suicide set-up? If you ask me—"

"I'm not asking," says the detective. "How would you explain them stab wounds?"

"I see it this way," the coroner interrupts. "She comes home, finds him freshly dead on the floor, having just killed himself. That explains how she has no blood on her from a spurting jugular. Evidently she took the suicide weapon and stabbed him three times in a frenzy of—shall we say—delight? She was glad to find him dead, and let herself go. There's no blood in these stab wounds, that proves he was stabbed later, after she found him lying there."

"No, no, now," roars the detective. "You're all wrong! You're dead wrong! That's not the way it worked at all! Not at all!" He launches himself, shaking his hair over his eyes, blundering off down blind alleys, kidding himself, chewing his cigar, pounding one fist into one palm. "No, no, you're all wrong!"

The coroner chucks me in the ribs. He looks at me. I look back with nothing in my eyes except cold shining light.

"Oh, but the coroner is right!" My wife, with the swiftness of a leopard paw darting, seizes upon this information and makes it her own. "He's exactly right!"

"Now wait a minute," complains the detective, seeing his case being torn from his hands.

"That's how it was," my wife insists, purring. She blinks big wet dark eyes. "I came in. He was lying there. And—something—came over me. I must've just seized the dagger and yelled I was glad he was dead and stabbed him some more!"

"But," wails the detective feebly, "that just can't be the way it happened." He knows it may be true, but he is slow coming back to reality. In a moment he will stomp his feet like a hurt child.

"That's how it happened," she says.

"Well now, it stands to reason," reasons the detective vaguely. He purposely drops his cigar so he'll have time to pick it up, brush it off and put it in his mouth before he has to think. "Well, it just don't work out that way," he says tiredly.

The coroner takes over, "Young woman, you won't be prosecuted for murder, but you'll be fined for mutilating a corpse!"

"Shut up, you!" cries the detective, whirling in all directions.

"That's all right," confides my wife. "Fine me. Go ahead."

The reporters are yelling, adding to the wild pattern of voices.

"Is that true, Mrs. Jameson?"

"You may quote me. It is true."

"Oh, God!" cries the detective.

My wife is tearing the case to shreds with her enameled claws, fondling it, loving it, ripping it carefully and intentionally down the middle, while the detective gapes and tries to shut her up.

"Don't pay any attention to her, boys!"

"But it's the truth," she says with honesty in her eyes.

"See?" chortle the reporters.

"Everybody clear out!" yells the detective. "I've had enough!"

But the case is closed. The reporters, laughing, declare it so. Bulbs flare, my wife winks prettily for them. The detective sees the credit for solving the case go fleeting. He manages to calm down, "Say, say, boys, about those pictures of me for the paper, now—"

"What pictures? Ha. Period. Ha. Exclamation point. Ha!"

"Clear out, everybody!" the detective rams his cigar into an ashtray. Parts of it fall on me. Nobody brushes them off.

The coroner is grinning, and outside the window an audience is watching, breathless. One might expect applause any moment.

It is all over. Peever, the detective jerks his head, "Come on, Mrs. Jameson. You reporters want any more, come along to the station."

There is a movement of bodies through the air, over the carpet, through the door. "Boy, what a story! Hotsy, what photographs!"

"Quick, Alice, look through the window. They're going to take him out!"

Someone drops a cloth over my profile.

"Oh, darn it, we're too late. Now we can't see *anything*!"

They leave the room, these reporters with their images of me, one of them even in color, carried under careless, joyful arms. Everybody is rushing for the early morning edition.

I AM pleased. I died before midnight. Therefore I will make the morning paper. Mr. Jones will pick me up with his Sanka. Thoughtful of me.

The detective is making a face. My wife arises and leaves the room. One cop outside the door nods at another cop, "How about some hotcakes and syrup down at the White Log?"

I cannot even lick my lips.

Wearily, the detective mops his brow. He unsheathes a fresh cigar and spits the bit end of it at my feet. He doesn't speak but he thinks a lot. By his face, he is a man with a dominant wife. He is dreading going home to her now; he likes to idle, stay out all night. Bodies give him an excuse. I'm a pretty good one. But I'm not worth much now. He will make a routine report and go home.

The coroner is the only one left. He pats me on the shoulder. "Nobody asked you any questions did they? Well, friend, what about it? Were you murdered by her or her friends, or did you kill yourself over—her. Huh? A fool in love is twice a fool."

Me, I won't talk.

It is late. The coroner leaves. Maybe he has a wife, too. Maybe he likes bodies because they don't argue back like some people.

I'm alone now.

In a few minutes a couple internes will come in in their whites, chewing gum. They'll glance casually at me, tilt me over onto a stretcher languidly and trot me downtown in a slow wagon, in no hurry.

And a week from now a man who is worrying about his income tax will turn a handle and flames will burn me. I will rush up the flue of the crematory in so many grey flecks.

And with some sort of ironic justice, and the providence of a stiff March wind, a week from now, when these various people—Carlton, my wife, the detective, the coroner, the reporters, Mrs. McLeod—when all these people are crossing the street, maybe suddenly they'll get something in their damned eyes! *All* of them!

Little pieces of grey ash, maybe.

WASTE PAPER IS A WEAPON OF WAR

Paper is urgently needed for packing food, ammunition and medical supplies for our armed forces—Don't burn or discard newspapers, magazines, wrapping paper, cartons.

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