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Panic

It was silly to be afraid of the old man. But the scythe he carried was long and sharp and dangerous . . .

BY GRANT COLBY



SHE HATED to ride in streetcars, and she especially hated it when she had to sit on one of the long seats at the rear, the ones that faced each other across the aisle. Usually, she walked home from her job at the post office, but today she'd gone to work with a sore throat, and during the afternoon it had grown worse. When her supervisor discovered she couldn't talk above a whisper, she'd been sent home on sick leave. She hadn't felt up to the long walk, and there had been no empty cabs, so the streetcar had been her only choice.

She opened the top button of her blouse and closed her eyes a moment, wondering if the slight dizziness she felt was due to her fever or the stifling August heat.

When she opened her eyes again, she saw the man. He was standing directly across from her, next to the rear door. An old man, tall, but very thin and a trifle stooped. His hair was a dirty white and there was a heavy gray stubble on his chin. He was wearing a

sweat-darkened blue shirt and frayed denim pants. There was a pair of pruning shears tucked into his belt, and in his right hand he held a large grass sickle. He was staring fixedly at the top of her blouse.

She frowned her annoyance, but the old man's eyes never wavered. She reached up and buttoned the blouse, looking at him as coldly as she could. Old men disgusted her, and on days when she wasn't feeling well, they disgusted her even more.

The old man's eyes moved slightly, and now she realized that he had not been looking directly at the top of her blouse. His eyes were deep set, heavily overhung by the gray eyebrows. The direction of his gaze had been deceptive. Actually, she knew, he had been staring past her shoulder, probably watching the traffic down in the street. In the instant it took her to realize her mistake, the old man's eyes moved again, and now he was looking directly into her own. She saw his eyes narrow slightly, and his lips tighten, and it came to her that she was still giving him the same cold look she'd given him when she thought he was staring at her opened blouse.

She started, and smiled quickly, making it an apology, reproaching herself for being so prone to assume something that probably hadn't entered the old man's mind.

She glanced about her. All of the seats were taken, but only the old man was standing. There was a middle-aged man, very fat, sitting

beside her, and a small boy across from her. All the other passengers, here in the rear of the car, were women.

She became aware of movement in front of her, and looked up. The old man was standing directly in front of her now. He was staring at her unblinkingly, and now his eyes were cold and his lips compressed into a thin, hard line. She could smell him now, the sweat and the whiskey and the sharp, sweet odor of fresh-cut grass.

She turned her face away, and suddenly the thin film of perspiration on her shoulders grew chill. She had offended him, she knew. He had been looking out the window, and had happened to glance at her while she was giving him the coldest look of which she was capable. And before she turned her face away, she had discovered that, up close like this, he no longer seemed so old. He was about sixty-five, she guessed, but he wasn't at all like the older men she knew in offices. He was like her Uncle Carl, a farmer. Her Uncle Carl was sixty-five, and yet he worked hard every day. He was still strong. This was the same kind of man — old, but with a lot of strength in his thin body.

She let her gaze move back toward him. Light glinted dully on the grass sickle. It had a wide curved blade with tiny bits of grass adhering to it. The hand that held it was brown and strong-looking, and she could tell from the way his wrist

corded that the man was gripping the handle of the sickle with all his strength.

It's just my imagination, she told herself. I've got a fever, and I feel a little guilty for looking at him that way. That's all. He's just another old man that makes a living cutting grass and shrubbery for people out in the suburbs, like all those other old men I see working out there.

She forced another smile to her lips and looked up at the old man again.

He was smiling too, but it was like no smile she had ever seen before. It brought a clutch of fear to her stomach.

God, she thought, I've got to get out of here. I've got to.

When the streetcar started to slow for the next stop, she tried to rise. But the old man was leaning over her, blocking her way. She hesitated, then slid along the seat. The old man took a long step, keeping directly in front of her. When she tried again to get to her feet, the old man brought the grass sickle up so that it was only inches from her face. She saw the gleam of the honed cutting edge, and abruptly she felt too weak to stand. She sank back against the seat, breathing rapidly, a dull pain in her chest.

The pain in her chest seemed to spread. There was an ache behind her eyes now, and her teeth began to hurt. She moistened her lips, glancing about her. Everyone was looking at the old man. Everyone but the

little boy across the aisle. He was asleep, his head resting against his mother's arm. The women in the rear of the car all had the same expression of fear, their faces frozen as if they were afraid of diverting the old man's attention to themselves. The woman with the little boy had her arm around him, her body a little in front of him, as if to shield him.

She looked at the fat, middle-aged man beside her. He was sweating, and his lips were pale. He met her eyes a moment, and then his eyes crawled away. He was afraid, she knew. They were all afraid. They had seen what had happened, and they were all so terrified of the gleaming sickle that they dared not move or speak.

The streetcar started up again. It was stopping only every two blocks now. At the next stop, the woman with the little boy suddenly grabbed him up in her arms and darted for the door. It seemed to unfreeze the other passengers, and they followed her. None of them said anything. None of them looked at the old man with the sickle. The fat man beside her seemed undecided for a moment, and then he too got up and left the car.

She looked toward the front of the car. None of the passengers facing the front had noticed anything. They were talking, reading newspapers, oblivious to what was occurring in the rear of the car.

The minutes dragged by, while

her terror mounted and the old man stood above her, swaying slightly with the motion of the car.

They reached the last stop before the end of the line, and the old man turned suddenly and left the car.

She stared after him a moment, and then put her hands to her face and tried to choke back the sobs. She felt the warm trickle of tears through her fingers, and took out her handkerchief to dry her eyes. She got off at the last stop and, half blindly, started running back in the direction they had come, toward the police station house a block away.

The streets out here were deserted, and when she realized this she lifted her skirts and ran as fast as she could. As she passed the end of a high, ornamental hedge, a foot went out and she pitched headlong to the sidewalk. She felt herself grabbed by the hair, and the next instant she had been jerked back behind the hedge. The old man was above her, breathing hard, sweat streaming from his face.

She opened her mouth to scream, forgetting that the sore throat had taken her voice. There was a rush of air past her lips, and that was all.

The old man held on to her hair, while with the other hand he drew the grass sickle back to his shoulder.

"So you thought you'd turn me in!" he said, his voice ragged. "You

just couldn't run back to that station house fast enough, could you?"

She tried to break his hold on her hair, but he was too strong. He threw one leg across her body, pinning her to the ground.

"You made me, didn't you?" he said. "I seen you looking at me that way. I knew you'd spotted me, when I saw that hard look. I seen you coming out of that post office, too. You saw my Wanted dodger on the bulletin board, and you spotted me the second I got on that streetcar."

"No!" she whispered hoarsely. "God, no! I —"

He jerked her head savagely to one side. "You read all about how they wanted me for murder, damn you!"

"No!"

"Well, you ain't putting *me* in no chair. Nobody as dumb as you is going to help fry me, by God. I knew you'd have to get off at the end of the line, so I just got off at the stop before that and run along behind the hedges till I found a proper spot to wait for you. I knew damn well you'd head straight back to the station house."

"Please, please . . ." She tried to say something else, but the words would not come. She was still trying when the grass sickle sliced through her throat and into the earth beneath it.

