

Button, Button

RICHARD MATHESON

The package was lying by the front door—a cube-shaped carton sealed with tape, their name and address printed by hand: “Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Lewis, 217 E. Thirty-seventh Street, New York, New York 10016.” Norma picked it up, unlocked the door, and went into the apartment. It was just getting dark.

After she put the lamb chops in the broiler, she sat down to open the package.

Inside the carton was a push-button unit fastened to a small wooden box. A glass dome covered the button. Norma tried to lift it off, but it was locked in place. She turned the unit over and saw a folded piece of paper Scotch-taped to the bottom of the box. She pulled it off: “Mr. Steward will call on you at 8:00 P.M.”

Norma put the button unit beside her on the couch. She reread the typed note, smiling.

A few moments later, she went back into the kitchen to make the salad.

The doorbell rang at eight o'clock. “I’ll get it,” Norma called from the kitchen. Arthur was in the living room, reading.

There was a small man in the hallway. He removed his hat as Norma opened the door. “Mrs. Lewis?” he inquired politely.

“Yes?”

“I’m Mr. Steward.”

“Oh, yes.” Norma repressed a smile. She was sure now it was a sales pitch.

“May I come in?” asked Mr. Steward.

“I’m rather busy,” Norma said, “I’ll get you your whatchamacallit, though.” She started to turn.

“Don’t you want to know what it is?”

Norma turned back. Mr. Steward’s tone had been offensive. “No, I don’t think so,” she replied.

“It could prove very valuable,” he told her.

“Monetarily?” she challenged.

Mr. Steward nodded. “Monetarily,” he said.

Norma frowned. She didn’t like his attitude. “What are you trying to sell?” she asked.

“I’m not selling anything,” he answered.

Arthur came out of the living room. “Something wrong?”

Mr. Steward introduced himself.

“Oh, the—” Arthur pointed toward the living room and smiled. “What is that gadget, anyway?”

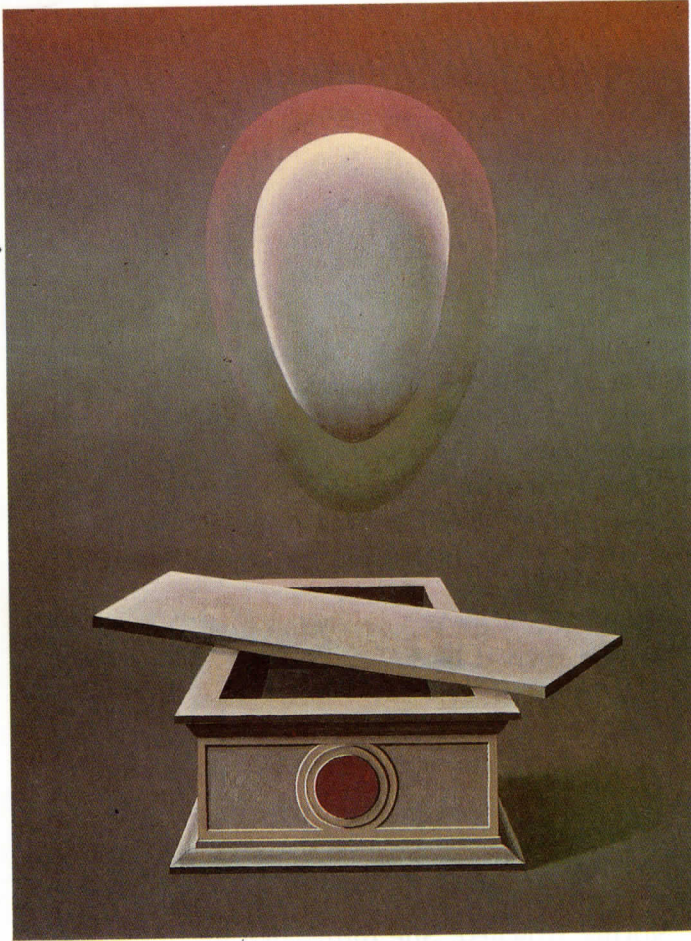
“It won’t take long to explain,” replied Mr. Steward. “May I come in?”

“If you’re selling something—,” Arthur said.

Mr. Steward shook his head. “I’m not.”

Words
to Know
and Use

offensive (ō fen’ siv) *adj.* causing anger or resentment; obnoxious
monetarily (män’ ə ter’ ə lē) *adj.* in terms of money; financially



TRANSECTION #24 1977 Clarence Holbrook Carter
Courtesy of the artist.

Arthur looked at Norma. "Up to you," she said.

He hesitated. "Well, why not?" he said.

They went into the living room and Mr. Steward sat in Norma's chair. He reached into an inside coat pocket and withdrew a small sealed envelope. "Inside here is a key to the bell-unit dome," he said. He set the envelope on the chair-side table. "The bell is connected to our office."

"What's it for?" asked Arthur.

"If you push the button," Mr. Steward told him, "somewhere in the world someone you don't know will die. In return for which you will receive a payment of \$50,000."

Norma stared at the small man. He was smiling.

"What are you talking about?" Arthur asked him.

Mr. Steward looked surprised. "But I've just explained," he said.

"Is this a practical joke?" asked Arthur.

"Not at all. The offer is completely genuine."

"You aren't making sense," Arthur said. "You expect us to believe—"

"Whom do you represent?" demanded Norma.

Mr. Steward looked embarrassed. "I'm afraid I'm not at liberty to tell you that," he said. "However, I assure you, the organization is of international scope."

"I think you'd better leave," Arthur said, standing.

Mr. Steward rose. "Of course."

"And take your button unit with you."

"Are you sure you wouldn't care to think about it for a day or so?"

Arthur picked up the button unit and the envelope and thrust them into Mr. Steward's hands. He walked into the hall and pulled open the door.

"I'll leave my card," said Mr. Steward. He placed it on the table by the door.

When he was gone, Arthur tore it in half and tossed the pieces onto the table.

Norma was still sitting on the sofa. "What do you think it was?" she asked.

"I don't care to know," he answered.

She tried to smile but couldn't. "Aren't you curious at all?"

"No." He shook his head.

After Arthur returned to his book, Norma went back to the kitchen and finished washing the dishes.

“Why won’t you talk about it?” Norma asked.

Arthur’s eyes shifted as he brushed his teeth. He looked at his reflection in the bathroom mirror.

“Doesn’t it intrigue you?”

“It offends me,” Arthur said.

“I know, but”—Norma rolled another curler in her hair—“doesn’t it intrigue you, too?”

“You think it’s a practical joke?” she asked as they went into the bedroom.

“If it is, it’s a sick one.”

Norma sat on her bed and took off her slippers. “Maybe it’s some kind of psychological research.”

Arthur shrugged. “Could be.”

“Maybe some eccentric millionaire is doing it.”

“Maybe.”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?”

Arthur shook his head.

“Why?”

“Because it’s immoral,” he told her.

Norma slid beneath the covers. “Well, I think it’s intriguing,” she said.

Arthur turned off the lamp and leaned over to kiss her. “Good night,” he said.

“Good night.” She patted his back.

Norma closed her eyes. Fifty thousand dollars, she thought.

In the morning, as she left the apartment, Norma saw the card halves on the table. Impulsively, she dropped them into her purse. She locked the front door and joined Arthur in the elevator.

While she was on her coffee break, she took the card halves from her purse and held the torn edges together. Only Mr.

Steward’s name and telephone number were printed on the card.

After lunch, she took the card halves from her purse again and Scotch-taped the edges together. “Why am I doing this?” she thought.

Just before five, she dialed the number.

“Good afternoon,” said Mr. Steward’s voice.

Norma almost hung up but restrained herself. She cleared her throat. “This is Mrs. Lewis,” she said.

“Yes, Mrs. Lewis,” Mr. Steward sounded pleased.

“I’m curious.”

“That’s natural,” Mr. Steward said.

“Not that I believe a word of what you told us.”

“Oh, it’s quite authentic,” Mr. Steward answered.

“Well, whatever—” Norma swallowed. “When you said someone in the world would die, what did you mean?”

“Exactly that,” he answered. “It could be anyone. All we guarantee is that you don’t know them. And, of course, that you wouldn’t have to watch them die.”

“For \$50,000,” Norma said.

“That is correct.”

She made a scoffing sound. “That’s crazy.”

“Nonetheless, that is the proposition,” Mr. Steward said. “Would you like me to return the button unit?”

Norma stiffened. “*Certainly not.*” She hung up angrily.

The package was lying by the front door; Norma saw it as she left the elevator. Well, of all the nerve, she thought. She glared at the carton as she unlocked the door. I just

**Words
to Know
and Use**

intrigue (in trēg') *v.* to arouse the interest or curiosity of; fascinate
eccentric (ek sen' trik) *adj.* out of the ordinary; odd
proposition (prəp' ə zish' ən) *n.* a plan, proposal, deal, or scheme

won't take it in, she thought. She went inside and started dinner.

Later, she went into the front hall. Opening the door, she picked up the package and carried it into the kitchen, leaving it on the table.

She sat in the living room, looking out the window. After a while, she went back into the kitchen to turn the cutlets in the broiler. She put the package in a bottom cabinet. She'd throw it out in the morning.

"Maybe some eccentric millionaire is playing games with people," she said.

Arthur looked up from his dinner. "I don't understand you."

"What does *that* mean?"

"*Let it go*," he told her.

Norma ate in silence. Suddenly, she put her fork down. "Suppose it's a genuine offer?" she said.

Arthur stared at her.

"*Suppose it's a genuine offer?*"

"All right, suppose it is?" He looked incredulous. "What would you like to do? Get the button back and push it? *Murder* someone?"

Norma looked disgusted. "*Murder.*"

"How would you define it?"

"If you don't even *know* the person?" Norma said.

Arthur looked astounded. "Are you saying what I think you are?"

"If it's some old Chinese peasant ten thousand miles away? Some diseased native in the Congo?"¹

"How about a baby boy in Pennsylvania?" Arthur countered. "Some beautiful little girl on the next block?"

"Now you're loading things."

"The point is, Norma," he continued, "what's the difference whom you kill? It's still murder."

"The point is," Norma broke in, "if it's

someone you've never seen in your life and never *will* see, someone whose death you don't even have to *know* about, you *still* wouldn't push the button?"

Arthur stared at her, appalled. "You mean *you would?*"

"Fifty thousand dollars, Arthur."

"What has the amount—"

"*Fifty thousand dollars*, Arthur," Norma interrupted. "A chance to take that trip to Europe we've always talked about."

"Norma, no."

"A chance to buy that cottage on the island."

"Norma, *no.*" His face was white.

She shuddered. "All right, take it easy," she said. "Why are you getting so upset? It's only talk."

After dinner, Arthur went into the living room. Before he left the table, he said, "I'd rather not discuss it anymore, if you don't mind."

Norma shrugged. "Fine with me."

She got up earlier than usual to make pancakes, eggs, and bacon for Arthur's breakfast.

"What's the occasion?" he asked with a smile.

"No occasion." Norma looked offended. "I wanted to do it, that's all."

"Good," he said. "I'm glad you did."

She refilled his cup. "Wanted to show you I'm not—" She shrugged.

"Not what?"

"Selfish."

"Did I say you were?"

"Well"—she gestured vaguely—"last night. . . ."

Arthur didn't speak.

"All that talk about the button," Norma

1. **the Congo**: an African nation now known as Zaire.



SEVEN A.M. NEWS 1976-78
Alfred Leslie
Collection of Joseph D. and Janet M. Shein,
Merion, Pennsylvania.

said. "I think you—well, misunderstood me."

"In what way?" His voice was guarded.

"I think you felt"—she gestured again—"that I was only thinking of myself."

"Oh."

"I wasn't."

"Norma—"

"Well, I *wasn't*. When I talked about Europe, a cottage on the island—"

"Norma, why are we getting so involved in this?"

"I'm not involved at all." She drew in a shaking breath. "I'm simply trying to indicate that—"

"What?"

"That I'd like for *us* to go to Europe. Like for *us* to have a cottage on the island. Like for *us* to have a nicer apartment, nicer furniture, nicer clothes, a car. Like for *us* to finally have a *baby*, for that matter."

"Norma, we will," he said.

"When?"

He stared at her in dismay. "Norma—"

"When?!"

"Are you"—he seemed to draw back slightly—"are you really saying—"

"I'm saying that they're probably doing it for some research project!" she cut him off.

"That they want to know what average people would do under such a circumstance! That they're just *saying* someone would die,

in order to study reactions, see if there'd be guilt, anxiety, whatever! You don't think they'd *kill* somebody, do you?!"

Arthur didn't answer. She saw his hands trembling. After a while, he got up and left.

When he'd gone to work, Norma remained at the table, staring into her coffee. I'm going to be late, she thought. She shrugged. What difference did it make? She should be home, anyway, not working in an office.

While she was stacking dishes, she turned abruptly, dried her hands, and took the package from the bottom cabinet. Opening it, she set the button unit on the table. She stared at it for a long time before taking the key from its envelope and removing the glass dome. She stared at the button. How ridiculous, she thought. All this furor over a meaningless button.

Reaching out, she pressed it down. For *us*, she thought angrily.

She shuddered. Was it *happening*? A chill of horror swept across her.

In a moment, it had passed. She made a contemptuous noise. *Ridiculous*, she thought. To get so worked up over nothing.

She threw the button unit, dome, and key into the wastebasket and hurried to dress for work.

She had just turned over the supper steaks when the telephone rang. She picked up the receiver. "Hello?"

"Mrs. Lewis?"

"Yes?"

"This is the Lenox Hill Hospital."

She felt unreal as the voice informed her of the subway accident—the shoving crowd, Arthur pushed from the platform in front of the train. She was conscious of shaking her head but couldn't stop.

As she hung up, she remembered Arthur's life-insurance policy for \$25,000, with double indemnity² for—

"No." She couldn't seem to breathe. She struggled to her feet and walked into the kitchen numbly. Something cold pressed at her skull as she removed the button unit from the wastebasket. There were no nails or screws visible. She couldn't see how it was put together.

Abruptly, she began to smash it on the sink edge, pounding it harder and harder, until the wood split. She pulled the sides apart, cutting her fingers without noticing. There were no transistors in the box, no wires or tubes.

The box was empty.

She whirled with a gasp as the telephone rang. Stumbling into the living room, she picked up the receiver.

"Mrs. Lewis?" Mr. Steward asked.

It wasn't her voice shrieking so; it couldn't be. "*You said I wouldn't know the one that died!*"

"My dear lady," Mr. Steward said. "Do you really think you knew your husband?"

2. **double indemnity:** a clause in some life insurance policies in which the insurance company offers to pay double the value of the policy in case of accidental death.

Responding to Reading

First Impressions

1. Did you like the story? Why or why not?

Second Thoughts

2. Why does Norma push the button? Which of her reasons are justified and which are not?
3. Whom or what does Mr. Steward represent? Support your opinion.
4. Mr. Steward asks Norma if she thinks she really knew her husband. Do you think she did? Explain.
5. Judging from what you know about people, would most people push the button? Explain.
6. Name a character from another selection who would *not* push the button. Support your answer with facts about that character.

Broader Connections

7. What would you do for a million dollars? For example, would you give up your best friend? Do you think that everyone has a price? Explain your answer.

Literary Concept: Character Traits

A **character trait** is a quality that a character shows, such as courage, greed, or honesty. You can infer character traits from a character's actions, appearance, speech, and thoughts and from what the narrator or other characters say about him or her. List character traits of Norma and Arthur. Use the list to compare and contrast these two characters.

Concept Review: Conflict What conflicts, both internal and external, does Norma face in this story?

Writing Options

1. Write the next episode in Norma's life after Arthur's death. For example, will the police or the insurance company investigate his death? Will Norma tell anyone about Mr. Steward and the button unit?
2. Change one element in the story—a character, an idea, or a conversation, for example. Describe how the change would affect the rest of the story.
3. Do you think Norma got what she deserved? Write a statement explaining your opinion.
4. Imagine that Mr. Steward selects another family to receive the box. Write a scene portraying his sales pitch and the next family's reaction. You may use your own family, another family you know, or a completely fictional family.
5. Now that you know the ending of "Button, Button," review the story to find and list clues that foreshadow this conclusion.

Vocabulary Practice

Exercise On your paper, write the letter of the word in each group that does not have a meaning similar to the other three words.

1. (a) aggressive (b) obnoxious (c) offensive (d) timid
2. (a) normal (b) ordinary (c) eccentric (d) usual
3. (a) sentimentally (b) monetarily (c) financially (d) cost-related
4. (a) refusal (b) proposition (c) deal (d) proposal
5. (a) bore (b) intrigue (c) fascinate (d) interest

*Words
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**eccentric
intrigue
monetarily
offensive
proposition**