

GUIDED READING QUESTIONS FOR SHORT STORY PACKET

As you read, annotate, or make note of, the following.

Plot & Structure

- What is the main conflict (internal or external) the protagonist must face?
- How does the author build suspense leading up to the climax?
- Did the ending resolve the conflict, leave you with questions, or provide a twist? Was it satisfying?
- How would the story change if the author had arranged the events in a different order?

Character Analysis

- Who is the protagonist, and what motivates their actions and decisions?
- Is a character dynamic (they change) or static (they stay the same)? What causes this?
- How do minor characters help us understand the main character better?
- Who is telling the story, and how does the point of view (e.g., 1st person, 3rd person) affect what we know?

Setting & Atmosphere

- Where and when does the story take place? How does the setting influence the plot or the characters' moods?
- How does the author use descriptive language to create a specific atmosphere (e.g., gloomy, mysterious, cheerful)?

Theme & Interpretation

- What is the central message, theme, or lesson the author wants you to take away?
- How do the title and any symbols used in the story connect to the overall theme?

Personal Connection

- Which character do you relate to the most, and why?
- How do the events or themes in this short story reflect real-world issues today?

THE SKULL

By Philip K. Dick

"What is this opportunity?" Conger asked. "Go on. I'm interested."

The room was silent; all faces were fixed on Conger--still in the drab prison uniform. The Speaker leaned forward slowly.

"Before you went to prison your trading business was paying well--all illegal--all very profitable. Now you have nothing, except the prospect of another six years in a cell."

Conger scowled.

"There is a certain situation, very important to this Council, that requires your peculiar abilities. Also, it is a situation you might find interesting. You were a hunter, were you not? You've done a great deal of trapping, hiding in the bushes, waiting at night for the game? I imagine hunting must be a source of satisfaction to you, the chase, the stalking--"

Conger sighed. His lips twisted. "All right," he said. "Leave that out. Get to the point. Who do you want me to kill?"

The Speaker smiled. "All in proper sequence," he said softly.

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The car slid to a stop. It was night; there was no light anywhere along the street. Conger looked out. "Where are we? What is this place?"

The hand of the guard pressed into his arm. "Come. Through that door."

Conger stepped down, onto the damp sidewalk. The guard came swiftly after him, and then the Speaker. Conger took a deep breath of the cold air. He studied the dim outline of the building rising up before them.

"I know this place. I've seen it before." He squinted, his eyes growing accustomed to the dark. Suddenly he became alert. "This is--"

"Yes. The First Church." The Speaker walked toward the steps. "We're expected."

"Expected? Here?"

"Yes." The Speaker mounted the stairs. "You know we're not allowed in

their Churches, especially with guns!" He stopped. Two armed soldiers loomed up ahead, one on each side.

"All right?" The Speaker looked up at them. They nodded. The door of the Church was open. Conger could see other soldiers inside, standing about, young soldiers with large eyes, gazing at the ikons and holy images.

"I see," he said.

"It was necessary," the Speaker said. "As you know, we have been singularly unfortunate in the past in our relations with the First Church."

"This won't help."

"But it's worth it. You will see."

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They passed through the hall and into the main chamber where the altar piece was, and the kneeling places. The Speaker scarcely glanced at the altar as they passed by. He pushed open a small side door and beckoned Conger through.

"In here. We have to hurry. The faithful will be flocking in soon."

Conger entered, blinking. They were in a small chamber, low-ceilinged, with dark panels of old wood. There was a smell of ashes and smoldering spices in the room. He sniffed. "What's that? The smell."

"Cups on the wall. I don't know." The Speaker crossed impatiently to the far side. "According to our information, it is hidden here by this--"

Conger looked around the room. He saw books and papers, holy signs and images. A strange low shiver went through him.

"Does my job involve anyone of the Church? If it does--"

The Speaker turned, astonished. "Can it be that you believe in the Founder? Is it possible, a hunter, a killer--"

"No. Of course not. All their business about resignation to death, non-violence--"

"What is it, then?"

Conger shrugged. "I've been taught not to mix with such as these. They have strange abilities. And you can't reason with them."

The Speaker studied Conger thoughtfully. "You have the wrong idea. It is no one here that we have in mind. We've found that killing them only tends to increase their numbers."

"Then why come here? Let's leave."

"No. We came for something important. Something you will need to identify your man. Without it you won't be able to find him." A trace of a smile crossed the Speaker's face. "We don't want you to kill the wrong person. It's too important."

"I don't make mistakes." Conger's chest rose. "Listen, Speaker--"

"This is an unusual situation," the Speaker said. "You see, the person you are after--the person that we are sending you to find--is known only by certain objects here. They are the only traces, the only means of identification. Without them--"

"What are they?"

He came toward the Speaker. The Speaker moved to one side. "Look," he said. He drew a sliding wall away, showing a dark square hole. "In there."

Conger squatted down, staring in. He frowned. "A skull! A skeleton!"

"The man you are after has been dead for two centuries," the Speaker said. "This is all that remains of him. And this is all you have with which to find him."

For a long time Conger said nothing. He stared down at the bones, dimly visible in the recess of the wall. How could a man dead centuries be killed? How could he be stalked, brought down?

Conger was a hunter, a man who had lived as he pleased, where he pleased. He had kept himself alive by trading, bringing furs and pelts in from the Provinces on his own ship, riding at high speed, slipping through the customs line around Earth.

He had hunted in the great mountains of the moon. He had stalked through empty Martian cities. He had explored--

The Speaker said, "Soldier, take these objects and have them carried to the car. Don't lose any part of them."

The soldier went into the cupboard, reaching gingerly, squatting on his heels.

"It is my hope," the Speaker continued softly, to Conger, "that you will demonstrate your loyalty to us, now. There are always ways for citizens to restore themselves, to show their devotion to their society. For you I think this would be a very good chance. I seriously doubt that a better one will come. And for your efforts there will be quite a restitution, of course."

The two men looked at each other; Conger, thin, unkempt, the Speaker immaculate in his uniform.

"I understand you," Conger said. "I mean, I understand this part, about the chance. But how can a man who has been dead two centuries be--"

"I'll explain later," the Speaker said. "Right now we have to hurry!" The soldier had gone out with the bones, wrapped in a blanket held carefully in his arms. The Speaker walked to the door. "Come. They've already discovered that we've broken in here, and they'll be coming at any moment."

They hurried down the damp steps to the waiting car. A second later the driver lifted the car up into the air, above the house-tops.

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The Speaker settled back in the seat.

"The First Church has an interesting past," he said. "I suppose you are familiar with it, but I'd like to speak of a few points that are of relevancy to us.

"It was in the twentieth century that the Movement began--during one of the periodic wars. The Movement developed rapidly, feeding on the general sense of futility, the realization that each war was breeding greater war, with no end in sight. The Movement posed a simple answer to the problem: Without military preparations--weapons--there could be no war. And without machinery and complex scientific technocracy there could be no weapons.

"The Movement preached that you couldn't stop war by planning for it. They preached that man was losing to his machinery and science, that it was getting away from him, pushing him into greater and greater wars. Down with society, they shouted. Down with factories and science! A few more wars and there wouldn't be much left of the world.

"The Founder was an obscure person from a small town in the American Middle West. We don't even know his name. All we know is that one day he appeared, preaching a doctrine of non-violence, non-resistance; no fighting, no paying taxes for guns, no research except for medicine. Live out your life quietly, tending your garden, staying out of public affairs; mind your own business. Be obscure, unknown, poor. Give away most of your possessions, leave the city. At least that was what developed from what he told the people."

The car dropped down and landed on a roof.

"The Founder preached this doctrine, or the germ of it; there's no telling how much the faithful have added themselves. The local authorities picked him up at once, of course. Apparently they were convinced that he meant it; he was never released. He was put to death, and his body buried secretly. It seemed that the cult was finished."

The Speaker smiled. "Unfortunately, some of his disciples reported seeing him after the date of his death. The rumor spread; he had conquered death, he was divine. It took hold, grew. And here we are today, with a First Church, obstructing all social progress, destroying society, sowing the seeds of anarchy--"

"But the wars," Conger said. "About them?"

"The wars? Well, there were no more wars. It must be acknowledged that the elimination of war was the direct result of non-violence practiced on a general scale. But we can take a more objective view of war today. What was so terrible about it? War had a profound selective value, perfectly in accord with the teachings of Darwin and Mendel and others. Without war the mass of useless, incompetent mankind, without training or intelligence, is permitted to grow and expand unchecked. War acted to reduce their numbers; like storms and earthquakes and droughts, it was nature's way of eliminating the unfit.

"Without war the lower elements of mankind have increased all out of proportion. They threaten the educated few, those with scientific knowledge and training, the ones equipped to direct society. They have no regard for science or a scientific society, based on reason. And this Movement seeks to aid and abet them. Only when scientists are in full control can the--"

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He looked at his watch and then kicked the car door open. "I'll tell you the rest as we walk."

They crossed the dark roof. "Doubtless you now know whom those bones belonged to, who it is that we are after. He has been dead just two centuries, now, this ignorant man from the Middle West, this Founder. The tragedy is that the authorities of the time acted too slowly. They allowed him to speak, to get his message across. He was allowed to preach, to start his cult. And once such a thing is under way, there's no stopping it.

"But what if he had died before he preached? What if none of his doctrines had ever been spoken? It took only a moment for him to utter them, that we know. They say he spoke just once, just one time. Then the authorities came, taking him away. He offered no resistance; the incident was small."

The Speaker turned to Conger.

"Small, but we're reaping the consequences of it today."

They went inside the building. Inside, the soldiers had already laid out the skeleton on a table. The soldiers stood around it, their young faces intense.

Conger went over to the table, pushing past them. He bent down, staring at the bones. "So these are his remains," he murmured. "The Founder. The Church has hidden them for two centuries."

"Quite so," the Speaker said. "But now we have them. Come along down the hall."

They went across the room to a door. The Speaker pushed it open. Technicians looked up. Conger saw machinery, whirring and turning; benches and retorts. In the center of the room was a gleaming crystal cage.

The Speaker handed a Slem-gun to Conger. "The important thing to remember is that the skull must be saved and brought back--for comparison and proof. Aim low--at the chest."

Conger weighed the gun in his hands. "It feels good," he said. "I know this gun--that is, I've seen them before, but I never used one."

The Speaker nodded. "You will be instructed on the use of the gun and the operation of the cage. You will be given all data we have on the time and location. The exact spot was a place called Hudson's field. About 1960 in a small community outside Denver, Colorado. And don't forget--the only means of identification you will have will be the skull. There are visible characteristics of the front teeth, especially the left incisor--"

Conger listened absently. He was watching two men in white carefully wrapping the skull in a plastic bag. They tied it and carried it into the crystal cage. "And if I should make a mistake?"

"Pick the wrong man? Then find the right one. Don't come back until you succeed in reaching this Founder. And you can't wait for him to start speaking; that's what we must avoid! You must act in advance. Take chances; shoot as soon as you think you've found him. He'll be someone unusual, probably a stranger in the area. Apparently he wasn't known."

Conger listened dimly.

"Do you think you have it all now?" the Speaker asked.

"Yes. I think so." Conger entered the crystal cage and sat down, placing his hands on the wheel.

"Good luck," the Speaker said.

"We'll be awaiting the outcome. There's some philosophical doubt as to

whether one can alter the past. This should answer the question once and for all."

Conger fingered the controls of the cage.

"By the way," the Speaker said. "Don't try to use this cage for purposes not anticipated in your job. We have a constant trace on it. If we want it back, we can get it back. Good luck."

Conger said nothing. The cage was sealed. He raised his finger and touched the wheel control. He turned the wheel carefully.

He was still staring at the plastic bag when the room outside vanished.

For a long time there was nothing at all. Nothing beyond the crystal mesh of the cage. Thoughts rushed through Conger's mind, helter-skelter. How would he know the man? How could he be certain, in advance? What had he looked like? What was his name? How had he acted, before he spoke? Would he be an ordinary person, or some strange outlandish crank?

Conger picked up the Slem-gun and held it against his cheek. The metal of the gun was cool and smooth. He practiced moving the sight. It was a beautiful gun, the kind of gun he could fall in love with. If he had owned such a gun in the Martian desert--on the long nights when he had lain, cramped and numbed with cold, waiting for things that moved through the darkness--

He put the gun down and adjusted the meter readings of the cage. The spiraling mist was beginning to condense and settle. All at once forms wavered and fluttered around him.

Colors, sounds, movements filtered through the crystal wire. He clamped the controls off and stood up.

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He was on a ridge overlooking a small town. It was high noon. The air was crisp and bright. A few automobiles moved along a road. Off in the distance were some level fields. Conger went to the door and stepped outside. He sniffed the air. Then he went back into the cage.

He stood before the mirror over the shelf, examining his features. He had trimmed his beard--they had not got him to cut it off--and his hair was neat. He was dressed in the clothing of the middle-twentieth century, the odd collar and coat, the shoes of animal hide. In his pocket was money of the times. That was important. Nothing more was needed.

Nothing, except his ability, his special cunning. But he had never used it in such a way before.

He walked down the road toward the town.

The first things he noticed were the newspapers on the stands. April 5, 1961. He was not too far off. He looked around him. There was a filling station, a garage, some taverns, and a ten-cent store. Down the street was a grocery store and some public buildings.

A few minutes later he mounted the stairs of the little public library and passed through the doors into the warm interior.

The librarian looked up, smiling.

"Good afternoon," she said.

He smiled, not speaking because his words would not be correct; accented and strange, probably. He went over to a table and sat down by a heap of magazines. For a moment he glanced through them. Then he was on his feet again. He crossed the room to a wide rack against the wall. His heart began to beat heavily.

Newspapers--weeks on end. He took a roll of them over to the table and began to scan them quickly. The print was odd, the letters strange. Some of the words were unfamiliar.

He set the papers aside and searched farther. At last he found what he wanted. He carried the Cherrywood Gazette to the table and opened it to the first page. He found what he wanted:

PRISONER HANGS SELF

An unidentified man, held by the county sheriff's office for suspicion of criminal syndicalism, was found dead this morning, by--

He finished the item. It was vague, uninforming. He needed more. He carried the _Gazette_ back to the racks and then, after a moment's hesitation, approached the librarian.

"More?" he asked. "More papers. Old ones?"

She frowned. "How old? Which papers?"

"Months old. And--before."

"Of the _Gazette_? This is all we have. What did you want? What are you looking for? Maybe I can help you."

He was silent.

"You might find older issues at the _Gazette_ office," the woman said, taking off her glasses. "Why don't you try there? But if you'd tell me, maybe I could help you--"

He went out.

The _Gazette_ office was down a side street; the sidewalk was broken and cracked. He went inside. A heater glowed in the corner of the small office. A heavy-set man stood up and came slowly over to the counter.

"What did you want, mister?" he said.

"Old papers. A month. Or more."

"To buy? You want to buy them?"

"Yes." He held out some of the money he had. The man stared.

"Sure," he said. "Sure. Wait a minute." He went quickly out of the room. When he came back he was staggering under the weight of his armload, his face red. "Here are some," he grunted.

"Took what I could find. Covers the whole year. And if you want more--"

Conger carried the papers outside. He sat down by the road and began to go through them.

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What he wanted was four months back, in December. It was a tiny item, so small that he almost missed it. His hands trembled as he scanned it, using the small dictionary for some of the archaic terms.

MAN ARRESTED FOR UNLICENSED DEMONSTRATION

An unidentified man who refused to give his name was picked up in Cooper Creek by special agents of the sheriff's office, according to Sheriff Duff. It was said the man was recently noticed in this area and had been watched continually. It was--

Cooper Creek. December, 1960. His heart pounded. That was all he needed to know. He stood up, shaking himself, stamping his feet on the cold ground. The sun had moved across the sky to the very edge of the hills. He smiled. Already he had discovered the exact time and place. Now he needed only to go back, perhaps to November, to Cooper Creek--

He walked back through the main section of town, past the library, past the grocery store. It would not be hard; the hard part was over. He would go there; rent a room, prepare to wait until the man appeared.

He turned the corner. A woman was coming out of a doorway, loaded down with packages. Conger stepped aside to let her pass. The woman glanced at him. Suddenly her face turned white. She stared, her mouth open.

Conger hurried on. He looked back. What was wrong with her? The woman was still staring; she had dropped the packages to the ground. He increased his speed. He turned a second corner and went up a side street. When he looked back again the woman had come to the entrance of the street and was starting after him. A man joined her, and the two of them began to run toward him.

He lost them and left the town, striding quickly, easily, up into the hills at the edge of town. When he reached the cage he stopped. What had happened? Was it something about his clothing? His dress?

He pondered. Then, as the sun set, he stepped into the cage.

Conger sat before the wheel. For a moment he waited, his hands resting lightly on the control. Then he turned the wheel, just a little, following the control readings carefully.

The grayness settled down around him.

But not for very long.

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The man looked him over critically. "You better come inside," he said. "Out of the cold."

"Thanks." Conger went gratefully through the open door, into the living-room. It was warm and close from the heat of the little kerosene heater in the corner. A woman, large and shapeless in her flowered dress, came from the kitchen. She and the man studied him critically.

"It's a good room," the woman said. "I'm Mrs. Appleton. It's got heat. You need that this time of year."

"Yes." He nodded, looking around.

"You want to eat with us?"

"What?"

"You want to eat with us?" The man's brows knitted. "You're not a foreigner, are you, mister?"

"No." He smiled. "I was born in this country. Quite far west, though."

"California?"

"No." He hesitated. "In Oregon."

"What's it like up there?" Mrs. Appleton asked. "I hear there's a lot of trees and green. It's so barren here. I come from Chicago, myself."

"That's the Middle West," the man said to her. "You ain't no foreigner."

"Oregon isn't foreign, either," Conger said. "It's part of the United States."

The man nodded absently. He was staring at Conger's clothing.

"That's a funny suit you got on, mister," he said. "Where'd you get that?"

Conger was lost. He shifted uneasily. "It's a good suit," he said. "Maybe I better go some other place, if you don't want me here."

They both raised their hands protestingly. The woman smiled at him. "We just have to look out for those Reds. You know, the government is always warning us about them."

"The Reds?" He was puzzled.

"The government says they're all around. We're supposed to report anything strange or unusual, anybody doesn't act normal."

"Like me?"

They looked embarrassed. "Well, you don't look like a Red to me," the man said. "But we have to be careful. The Tribune says--"

Conger half listened. It was going to be easier than he had thought. Clearly, he would know as soon as the Founder appeared. These people, so suspicious of anything different, would be buzzing and gossiping and spreading the story. All he had to do was lie low and listen, down at the general store, perhaps. Or even here, in Mrs. Appleton's boarding house.

"Can I see the room?" he said.

"Certainly." Mrs. Appleton went to the stairs. "I'll be glad to show it to you."

They went upstairs. It was colder upstairs, but not nearly as cold as outside. Nor as cold as nights on the Martian deserts. For that he was grateful.

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He was walking slowly around the store, looking at the cans of vegetables, the frozen packages of fish and meats shining and clean in the open refrigerator counters.

Ed Davies came toward him. "Can I help you?" he said. The man was a little oddly dressed, and with a beard! Ed couldn't help smiling.

"Nothing," the man said in a funny voice. "Just looking."

"Sure," Ed said. He walked back behind the counter. Mrs. Hacket was wheeling her cart up.

"Who's he?" she whispered, her sharp face turned, her nose moving, as if it were sniffing. "I never seen him before."

"I don't know."

"Looks funny to me. Why does he wear a beard? No one else wears a beard. Must be something the matter with him."

"Maybe he likes to wear a beard. I had an uncle who--"

"Wait." Mrs. Hacket stiffened. "Didn't that--what was his name? The Red--that old one. Didn't he have a beard? Marx. He had a beard."

Ed laughed. "This ain't Karl Marx. I saw a photograph of him once."

Mrs. Hacket was staring at him. "You did?"

"Sure." He flushed a little. "What's the matter with that?"

"I'd sure like to know more about him," Mrs. Hacket said. "I think we ought to know more, for our own good."

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"Hey, mister! Want a ride?"

Conger turned quickly, dropping his hand to his belt. He relaxed. Two young kids in a car, a girl and a boy. He smiled at them. "A ride? Sure."

Conger got into the car and closed the door. Bill Willet pushed the gas and the car roared down the highway.

"I appreciate a ride," Conger said carefully. "I was taking a walk between towns, but it was farther than I thought."

"Where are you from?" Lora Hunt asked. She was pretty, small and dark, in her yellow sweater and blue skirt.

"From Cooper Creek."

"Cooper Creek?" Bill said. He frowned. "That's funny. I don't remember seeing you before."

"Why, do you come from there?"

"I was born there. I know everybody there."

"I just moved in. From Oregon."

"From Oregon? I didn't know Oregon people had accents."

"Do I have an accent?"

"You use words funny."

"How?"

"I don't know. Doesn't he, Lora?"

"You slur them," Lora said, smiling. "Talk some more. I'm interested in dialects." She glanced at him, white-teethed. Conger felt his heart constrict.

"I have a speech impediment."

"Oh." Her eyes widened. "I'm sorry."

They looked at him curiously as the car purred along. Conger for his part was struggling to find some way of asking them questions without seeming curious. "I guess people from out of town don't come here much," he said. "Strangers."

"No." Bill shook his head. "Not very much."

"I'll bet I'm the first outsider for a long time."

"I guess so."

Conger hesitated. "A friend of mine--someone I know, might be coming through here. Where do you suppose I might--" He stopped. "Would there be anyone certain to see him? Someone I could ask, make sure I don't miss him if he comes?"

They were puzzled. "Just keep your eyes open. Cooper Creek isn't very big."

"No. That's right."

They drove in silence. Conger studied the outline of the girl. Probably she was the boy's mistress. Perhaps she was his trial wife. Or had they developed trial marriage back so far? He could not remember. But surely such an attractive girl would be someone's mistress by this time; she would be sixteen or so, by her looks. He might ask her sometime, if they ever met again.

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The next day Conger went walking along the one main street of Cooper Creek. He passed the general store, the two filling stations, and then the post office. At the corner was the soda fountain.

He stopped. Lora was sitting inside, talking to the clerk. She was laughing, rocking back and forth.

Conger pushed the door open. Warm air rushed around him. Lora was drinking hot chocolate, with whipped cream. She looked up in surprise as he slid into the seat beside her.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "Am I intruding?"

"No." She shook her head. Her eyes were large and dark. "Not at all."

The clerk came over. "What do you want?"

Conger looked at the chocolate. "Same as she has."

Lora was watching Conger, her arms folded, elbows on the counter. She smiled at him. "By the way. You don't know my name. Lora Hunt."

She was holding out her hand. He took it awkwardly, not knowing what to do with it. "Conger is my name," he murmured.

"Conger? Is that your last or first name?"

"Last or first?" He hesitated. "Last. Omar Conger."

"Omar?" She laughed. "That's like the poet, Omar Khayyam."

"I don't know of him. I know very little of poets. We restored very few works of art. Usually only the Church has been interested enough--" He broke off. She was staring. He flushed. "Where I come from," he finished.

"The Church? Which church do you mean?"

"The Church." He was confused. The chocolate came and he began to sip it gratefully. Lora was still watching him.

"You're an unusual person," she said. "Bill didn't like you, but he never likes anything different. He's so--so prosaic. Don't you think that when a person gets older he should become--broadened in his outlook?"

Conger nodded.

"He says foreign people ought to stay where they belong, not come here. But you're not so foreign. He means orientals; you know."

Conger nodded.

The screen door opened behind them. Bill came into the room. He stared at them. "Well," he said.

Conger turned. "Hello."

"Well." Bill sat down. "Hello, Lora." He was looking at Conger. "I didn't expect to see you here."

Conger tensed. He could feel the hostility of the boy. "Something wrong with that?"

"No. Nothing wrong with it."

There was silence. Suddenly Bill turned to Lora. "Come on. Let's go."

"Go?" She was astonished. "Why?"

"Just go!" He grabbed her hand. "Come on! The car's outside."

"Why, Bill Willet," Lora said. "You're jealous!"

"Who is this guy?" Bill said. "Do you know anything about him? Look at him, his beard--"

She flared. "So what? Just because he doesn't drive a Packard and go to Cooper High!"

Conger sized the boy up. He was big--big and strong. Probably he was part of some civil control organization.

"Sorry," Conger said. "I'll go."

"What's your business in town?" Bill asked. "What are you doing here? Why are you hanging around Lora?"

Conger looked at the girl. He shrugged. "No reason. I'll see you later."

He turned away. And froze. Bill had moved. Conger's fingers went to his belt. Half pressure, he whispered to himself. No more. Half pressure.

He squeezed. The room leaped around him. He himself was protected by the lining of his clothing, the plastic sheathing inside.

"My God--" Lora put her hands up. Conger cursed. He hadn't meant any of it for her. But it would wear off. There was only a half-amp to it. It would tingle.

Tingle, and paralyze.

He walked out the door without looking back. He was almost to the corner when Bill came slowly out, holding onto the wall like a drunken man. Conger went on.

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As Conger walked, restless, in the night, a form loomed in front of him. He stopped, holding his breath.

"Who is it?" a man's voice came. Conger waited, tense.

"Who is it?" the man said again. He clicked something in his hand. A light flashed. Conger moved.

"It's me," he said.

"Who is 'me'?"

"Conger is my name. I'm staying at the Appleton's place. Who are you?"

The man came slowly up to him. He was wearing a leather jacket. There was a gun at his waist.

"I'm Sheriff Duff. I think you're the person I want to talk to. You were in Bloom's today, about three o'clock?"

"Bloom's?"

"The fountain. Where the kids hang out." Duff came up beside him, shining his light into Conger's face. Conger blinked.

"Turn that thing away," he said.

A pause. "All right." The light flickered to the ground. "You were there. Some trouble broke out between you and the Willet boy. Is that right? You had a beef over his girl--"

"We had a discussion," Conger said carefully.

"Then what happened?"

"Why?"

"I'm just curious. They say you did something."

"Did something? Did what?"

"I don't know. That's what I'm wondering. They saw a flash, and something seemed to happen. They all blacked out. Couldn't move."

"How are they now?"

"All right."

There was silence.

"Well?" Duff said. "What was it? A bomb?"

"A bomb?" Conger laughed. "No. My cigarette lighter caught fire. There was a leak, and the fluid ignited."

"Why did they all pass out?"

"Fumes."

Silence. Conger shifted, waiting. His fingers moved slowly toward his belt. The Sheriff glanced down. He grunted.

"If you say so," he said. "Anyhow, there wasn't any real harm done." He stepped back from Conger. "And that Willet is a trouble-maker."

"Good night, then," Conger said. He started past the Sheriff.

"One more thing, Mr. Conger. Before you go. You don't mind if I look at your identification, do you?"

"No. Not at all." Conger reached into his pocket. He held his wallet out. The Sheriff took it and shined his flashlight on it. Conger watched, breathing shallowly. They had worked hard on the wallet, studying historic documents, relics of the times, all the papers they felt would be relevant.

Duff handed it back. "Okay. Sorry to bother you." The light winked off.

When Conger reached the house he found the Appletons sitting around the television set. They did not look up as he came in. He lingered at the door.

"Can I ask you something?" he said. Mrs. Appleton turned slowly. "Can I ask you--what's the date?"

"The date?" She studied him. "The first of December."

"December first! Why, it was just November!"

They were all looking at him. Suddenly he remembered. In the twentieth century they still used the old twelve-month system. November fed directly into December; there was no Quatermonth between.

He gasped. Then it was tomorrow! The second of December! Tomorrow!

"Thanks," he said. "Thanks."

He went up the stairs. What a fool he was, forgetting. The Founder had been taken into captivity on the second of December, according to the newspaper records. Tomorrow, only twelve hours hence, the Founder would appear to speak to the people and then be dragged away.

* * * * *

The day was warm and bright. Conger's shoes crunched the melting crust of snow. On he went, through the trees heavy with white. He climbed a hill and strode down the other side, sliding as he went.

He stopped to look around. Everything was silent. There was no one in sight. He brought a thin rod from his waist and turned the handle of it. For a moment nothing happened. Then there was a shimmering in the air.

The crystal cage appeared and settled slowly down. Conger sighed. It was good to see it again. After all, it was his only way back.

He walked up on the ridge. He looked around with some satisfaction, his hands on his hips. Hudson's field was spread out, all the way to the beginning of town. It was bare and flat, covered with a thin layer of snow.

Here, the Founder would come. Here, he would speak to them. And here the authorities would take him.

Only he would be dead before they came. He would be dead before he even spoke.

Conger returned to the crystal globe. He pushed through the door and stepped inside. He took the Slem-gun from the shelf and screwed the bolt into place. It was ready to go, ready to fire. For a moment he considered. Should he have it with him?

No. It might be hours before the Founder came, and suppose someone approached him in the meantime? When he saw the Founder coming toward the field, then he could go and get the gun.

Conger looked toward the shelf. There was the neat plastic package. He took it down and unwrapped it.

He held the skull in his hands, turning it over. In spite of himself, a cold feeling rushed through him. This was the man's skull, the skull of the Founder, who was still alive, who would come here, this day, who would stand on the field not fifty yards away.

What if he could see this, his own skull, yellow and eroded? Two centuries old. Would he still speak? Would he speak, if he could see it, the grinning, aged skull? What would there be for him to say, to tell the people? What message could he bring?

What action would not be futile, when a man could look upon his own aged, yellowed skull? Better they should enjoy their temporary lives, while they still had them to enjoy.

A man who could hold his own skull in his hands would believe in few causes, few movements. Rather, he would preach the opposite--

A sound. Conger dropped the skull back on the shelf and took up the gun. Outside something was moving. He went quickly to the door, his heart beating. Was it *he*? Was it the Founder, wandering by himself in the cold, looking for a place to speak? Was he meditating over his words, choosing his sentences?

What if he could see what Conger had held!

He pushed the door open, the gun raised.

Lora!

He stared at her. She was dressed in a wool jacket and boots, her hands in her pockets. A cloud of steam came from her mouth and nostrils. Her breast was rising and falling.

Silently, they looked at each other. At last Conger lowered the gun.

"What is it?" he said. "What are you doing here?"

She pointed. She did not seem able to speak. He frowned; what was wrong with her?

"What is it?" he said. "What do you want?" He looked in the direction she had pointed. "I don't see anything."

"They're coming."

"They? Who? Who are coming?"

"They are. The police. During the night the Sheriff had the state police send cars. All around, everywhere. Blocking the roads. There's about sixty of them coming. Some from town, some around behind." She stopped, gasping. "They said--they said--"

"What?"

"They said you were some kind of a Communist. They said--"

* * * * *

Conger went into the cage. He put the gun down on the shelf and came back out. He leaped down and went to the girl.

"Thanks. You came here to tell me? You don't believe it?"

"I don't know."

"Did you come alone?"

"No. Joe brought me in his truck. From town."

"Joe? Who's he?"

"Joe French. The plumber. He's a friend of Dad's."

"Let's go." They crossed the snow, up the ridge and onto the field. The little panel truck was parked half way across the field. A heavy short man was sitting behind the wheel, smoking his pipe. He sat up as he saw the two of them coming toward him.

"Are you the one?" he said to Conger.

"Yes. Thanks for warning me."

The plumber shrugged. "I don't know anything about this. Lora says you're all right." He turned around. "It might interest you to know some more of them are coming. Not to warn you--just curious."

"More of them?" Conger looked toward the town. Black shapes were picking their way across the snow.

"People from the town. You can't keep this sort of thing quiet, not in a small town. We all listen to the police radio; they heard the same way Lora did. Someone tuned in, spread it around--"

The shapes were getting closer. Conger could, make out a couple of them. Bill Willet was there, with some boys from the high school. The Appletons were along, hanging back in the rear.

"Even Ed Davies," Conger murmured.

The storekeeper was toiling onto the field, with three or four other men from the town.

"All curious as hell," French said. "Well, I guess I'm going back to town. I don't want my truck shot full of holes. Come on, Lora."

She was looking up at Conger, wide-eyed.

"Come on," French said again. "Let's go. You sure as hell can't stay here, you know."

"Why?"

"There may be shooting. That's what they all came to see. You know that don't you, Conger?"

"Yes."

"You have a gun? Or don't you care?" French smiled a little. "They've picked up a lot of people in their time, you know. You won't be lonely."

He cared, all right! He had to stay here, on the field. He couldn't afford to let them take him away. Any minute the Founder would appear, would step onto the field. Would he be one of the townsmen, standing silently at the foot of the field, waiting, watching?

Or maybe he was Joe French. Or maybe one of the cops. Anyone of them might find himself moved to speak. And the few words spoken this day were going to be important for a long time.

And Conger had to be there, ready when the first word was uttered!

"I care," he said. "You go on back to town. Take the girl with you."

Lora got stiffly in beside Joe French. The plumber started up the motor. "Look at them, standing there," he said. "Like vultures. Waiting to see someone get killed."

* * * * *

The truck drove away, Lora sitting stiff and silent, frightened now. Conger watched for a moment. Then he dashed back into the woods, between the trees, toward the ridge.

He could get away, of course. Anytime he wanted to he could get away. All he had to do was to leap into the crystal cage and turn the handles. But he had a job, an important job. He had to be here, here at this place, at this time.

He reached the cage and opened the door. He went inside and picked up the gun from the shelf. The Slem-gun would take care of them. He notched it up to full count. The chain reaction from it would flatten them all, the police, the curious, sadistic people--

They wouldn't take him! Before they got him, all of them would be dead. *He* would get away. He would escape. By the end of the day they would all be dead, if that was what they wanted, and he--

He saw the skull.

Suddenly he put the gun down. He picked up the skull. He turned the skull over. He looked at the teeth. Then he went to the mirror.

He held the skull up, looking in the mirror. He pressed the skull against his cheek. Beside his own face the grinning skull leered back at him, beside *his* skull, against his living flesh.

He bared his teeth. And he knew.

It was his own skull that he held. He was the one who would die. He was the Founder.

After a time he put the skull down. For a few minutes he stood at the controls, playing with them idly. He could hear the sound of motors outside, the muffled noise of men. Should he go back to the present, where the Speaker waited? He could escape, of course--

Escape?

He turned toward the skull. There it was, his skull, yellow with age. Escape? Escape, when he had held it in his own hands?

What did it matter if he put it off a month, a year, ten years, even fifty? Time was nothing. He had sipped chocolate with a girl born a hundred and fifty years before his time. Escape? For a little while, perhaps.

But he could not *really* escape, no more so than anyone else had ever escaped, or ever would.

Only, he had held it in his hands, his own bones, his own death's-head.

They had not.

He went out the door and across the field, empty handed. There were a lot of them standing around, gathered together, waiting. They expected a good fight; they knew he had something. They had heard about the incident at the fountain.

And there were plenty of police--police with guns and tear gas, creeping across the hills and ridges, between the trees, closer and closer. It was an old story, in this century.

One of the men tossed something at him. It fell in the snow by his feet, and he looked down. It was a rock. He smiled.

"Come on!" one of them called. "Don't you have any bombs?"

"Throw a bomb! You with the beard! Throw a bomb!"

"Let 'em have it!"

"Toss a few A Bombs!"

* * * * *

They began to laugh. He smiled. He put his hands to his hips. They suddenly turned silent, seeing that he was going to speak.

"I'm sorry," he said simply. "I don't have any bombs. You're mistaken."

There was a flurry of murmuring.

"I have a gun," he went on. "A very good one. Made by science even more advanced than your own. But I'm not going to use that, either."

They were puzzled.

"Why not?" someone called. At the edge of the group an older woman was watching. He felt a sudden shock. He had seen her before. Where?

He remembered. The day at the library. As he had turned the corner he had seen her. She had noticed him and been astounded. At the time, he did not understand why.

Conger grinned. So he *would* escape death, the man who right now was voluntarily accepting it. They were laughing, laughing at a man who had a gun but didn't use it. But by a strange twist of science he would appear again, a few months later, after his bones had been buried under the floor of a jail.

And so, in a fashion, he would escape death. He would die, but then, after a period of months, he would live again, briefly, for an afternoon.

An afternoon. Yet long enough for them to see him, to understand that he was still alive. To know that somehow he had returned to life.

And then, finally, he would appear once more, after two hundred years had passed. Two centuries later.

He would be born again, born, as a matter of fact, in a small trading village on Mars. He would grow up, learning to hunt and trade--

A police car came on the edge of the field and stopped. The people retreated a little. Conger raised his hands.

"I have an odd paradox for you," he said. "Those who take lives will lose their own. Those who kill, will die. But he who gives his own life away will live again!"

They laughed, faintly, nervously. The police were coming out, walking toward him. He smiled. He had said everything he intended to say. It was a good little paradox he had coined. They would puzzle over it, remember it.

Smiling, Conger awaited a death foreordained.

THE END

The Veldt

Ray Bradbury

“George, I wish you’d look at the nursery.”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, then.”

“I just want you to look at it, is all, or call a psychologist in to look at it.”

“What would a psychologist want with a nursery?”

“You know very well what he’d want.” His wife paused in the middle of the kitchen and watched the stove busy humming to itself, making supper for four.

“It’s just that the nursery is different now than it was.”

“All right, let’s have a look.”

They walked down the hall of their soundproofed Happylife Home, which had cost them thirty thousand dollars installed, this house which clothed and fed and rocked them to sleep and played and sang and was good to them. Their approach sensitized a switch somewhere and the nursery light flicked on when they came within ten feet of it. Similarly, behind them, in the halls, lights went on and off as they left them behind, with a soft automaticity.

“Well,” said George Hadley.

They stood on the thatched floor of the nursery. It was forty feet across by forty feet long and thirty feet high; it had cost half again as much as the rest of the house. “But nothing’s too good for our children,” George had said.

The nursery was silent. It was empty as a jungle glade at hot high noon. The walls were blank and two dimensional. Now, as George and Lydia Hadley stood in the center of the room, the walls began to purr and recede into crystalline distance, it seemed, and presently an African veldt appeared, in three dimensions, on all sides, in color reproduced to the final pebble and bit of straw. The ceiling above them became a deep sky with a hot yellow sun.

George Hadley felt the perspiration start on his brow.

“Let’s get out of this sun,” he said. “This is a little too real. But I don’t see anything wrong.”

“Wait a moment, you’ll see,” said his wife.

Now the hidden odorophonics were beginning to blow a wind of odor at the two people in the middle of the baked veldtland. The hot straw smell of lion grass, the cool green smell of the hidden water hole, the great rusty smell of animals, the smell of dust like a red paprika in the hot air. And now the sounds: the thump of distant antelope feet on grassy sod, the papery rustling of vultures.

A shadow passed through the sky. The shadow flickered on George Hadley’s upturned, sweating face.

“Filthy creatures,” he heard his wife say.

“The vultures.”

“You see, there are the lions, far over, that way. Now they’re on their way to the water hole.

They’ve just been eating,” said Lydia. “I don’t know what.”

“Some animal.” George Hadley put his hand up to shield off the burning light from his squinted eyes. “A zebra or a baby giraffe, maybe.”

“Are you sure?” His wife sounded peculiarly tense.

“No, it’s a little late to be sure,” he said, amused. “Nothing over there I can see but cleaned bone, and the vultures dropping for what’s left.”

“Did you hear that scream?” she asked.

“No.”

“About a minute ago?”

“Sorry, no.”

The lions were coming. And again George Hadley was filled with admiration for the mechanical genius who had conceived this room. A miracle of efficiency selling for an

absurdly low price. Every home should have one. Oh, occasionally they frightened you with their clinical accuracy, they startled you, gave you a twinge, but most of the time what fun for everyone, not only your own son and daughter, but for yourself when you felt like a quick jaunt to a foreign land, a quick change of scenery. Well, here it was! And here were the lions now, fifteen feet away, so real, so feverishly and startingly real that you could feel the prickling fur on your hand, and your mouth was stuffed with the dusty upholstery smell of their heated pelts, and the yellow of them was in your eyes like the yellow of an exquisite French tapestry, the yellows of lions and summer grass, and the sound of the matted lion lungs exhaling on the silent noontide, and the smell of meat from the panting, dripping mouths. The lions stood looking at George and Lydia Hadley with terrible green-yellow eyes.

“Watch out!” screamed Lydia.

The lions came running at them.

Lydia bolted and ran. Instinctively, George sprang after her. Outside, in the hall, with the door slammed he was laughing and she was crying, and they both stood appalled at the other’s reaction.

“George!”

“Lydia! Oh, my dear poor sweet Lydia!”

“They almost got us!”

“Walls, Lydia, remember; crystal walls, that’s all they are. Oh, they look real, I must admit—Africa in your parlor—but it’s all dimensional, superreactionary, supersensitive color film and mental tape film behind glass screens. It’s all odorophonics and sonics, Lydia. Here’s my handkerchief.”

“I’m afraid.” She came to him and put her body against him and cried steadily. “Did you see? Did you feel? It’s too real.”

“Now, Lydia...”

“You’ve got to tell Wendy and Peter not to read any more on Africa.”

“Of course—of course.” He patted her.

“Promise?”

“Sure.”

“And lock the nursery for a few days until I get my nerves settled.”

“You know how difficult Peter is about that. When I punished him a month ago by locking the nursery for even a few hours—the tantrum he threw! And Wendy too. They live for the nursery.”

“It’s got to be locked, that’s all there is to it.”

“All right.” Reluctantly he locked the huge door. “You’ve been working too hard. You need a rest.”

“I don’t know—I don’t know,” she said, blowing her nose, sitting down in a chair that immediately began to rock and comfort her. “Maybe I don’t have enough to do. Maybe I have time to think too much. Why don’t we shut the whole house off for a few days and take a vacation?”

“You mean you want to fry my eggs for me?”

“Yes.” She nodded.

“And darn my socks?”

“Yes.” A frantic, watery-eyed nodding.

“And sweep the house?”

“Yes, yes—oh, yes!”

“But I thought that’s why we bought this house, so we wouldn’t have to do anything?”

“That’s just it. I feel like I don’t belong here. The house is wife and mother now, and nursemaid.

Can I compete with an African veldt? Can I give a bath and scrub the children as efficiently or quickly as the automatic scrub bath can? I cannot. And it isn’t just me. It’s you. You’ve been awfully nervous lately.”

“I suppose I have been smoking too much.”

“You look as if you didn’t know what to do with yourself in this house, either. You smoke a

little more every morning and drink a little more every afternoon and need a little more sedative every night. You're beginning to feel unnecessary too."

"Am I?" He paused and tried to feel into himself to see what was really there.

"Oh, George!" She looked beyond him, at the nursery door. "Those lions can't get out of there, can they?"

He looked at the door and saw it tremble as if something had jumped against it from the other side.

"Of course not," he said.

At dinner they ate alone, for Wendy and Peter were at a special plastic carnival across town and had televised home to say they'd be late, to go ahead eating. So George Hadley, bemused, sat watching the dining-room table produce warm dishes of food from its mechanical interior.

"We forgot the ketchup," he said.

"Sorry," said a small voice within the table, and ketchup appeared.

As for the nursery, thought George Hadley, it won't hurt for the children to be locked out of it awhile. Too much of anything isn't good for anyone. And it was clearly indicated that the children had been spending a little too much time on Africa. That sun. He could feel it on his neck, still, like a hot paw. And the lions. And the smell of blood. Remarkable how the nursery caught the telepathic emanations of the children's minds and created life to fill their every desire. The children thought lions, and there were lions. The children thought zebras, and there were zebras.

Sun—sun. Giraffes—giraffes. Death and death.

That last. He chewed tastelessly on the meat that the table had cut for him. Death thoughts.

They were awfully young, Wendy and Peter, for death thoughts. Or, no, you were never too young, really. Long before you knew what death was you were wishing it on someone else. When you were two years old you were shooting people with cap pistols.

But this—the long, hot African veldt—the awful death in the jaws of a lion. And repeated again and again.

“Where are you going?”

He didn't answer Lydia. Preoccupied, he let the lights glow softly on ahead of him, extinguish behind him as he padded to the nursery door. He listened against it. Far away, a lion roared.

He unlocked the door and opened it. Just before he stepped inside, he heard a faraway scream.

And then another roar from the lions, which subsided quickly.

He stepped into Africa. How many times in the last year had he opened this door and found

Wonderland, Alice, the Mock Turtle, or Aladdin and his Magical Lamp, or Jack Pumpkinhead of Oz, or Dr. Doolittle, or the cow jumping over a very real—appearing moon—all the delightful contraptions of a make-believe world. How often had he seen Pegasus flying in the sky ceiling, or seen fountains of red fireworks, or heard angel voices singing. But now, is yellow hot Africa, this bake oven with murder in the heat. Perhaps Lydia was right. Perhaps they needed a little vacation from the fantasy which was growing a bit too real for ten-year-old children. It was all right to exercise one's mind with gymnastic fantasies, but when the lively child mind settled on one pattern... ? It seemed that, at a distance, for the past month, he had heard lions roaring, and smelled their strong odor seeping as far away as his study door. But, being busy, he had paid it no attention.

George Hadley stood on the African grassland alone. The lions looked up from their feeding, watching him. The only flaw to the illusion was the open door through which he could see his wife, far down the dark hall, like a framed picture, eating her dinner abstractedly.

“Go away,” he said to the lions.

They did not go.

He knew the principle of the room exactly. You sent out your thoughts. Whatever you thought would appear. “Let's have Aladdin and his lamp,” he snapped. The veldtland remained; the lions remained.

“Come on, room! I demand Aladin!” he said.

Nothing happened. The lions mumbled in their baked pelts.

“Aladin!”

He went back to dinner. “The fool room’s out of order,” he said. “It won’t respond.”

“Or—”

“Or what?”

“Or it can’t respond,” said Lydia, “because the children have thought about Africa and lions and killing so many days that the room’s in a rut.”

“Could be.”

“Or Peter’s set it to remain that way.”

“Set it?”

“He may have got into the machinery and fixed something.”

“Peter doesn’t know machinery.”

“He’s a wise one for ten. That I.Q. of his—”

“Nevertheless—”

“Hello, Mom. Hello, Dad.”

The Hadleys turned. Wendy and Peter were coming in the front door, cheeks like peppermint candy, eyes like bright blue agate marbles, a smell of ozone on their jumpers from their trip in the helicopter.

“You’re just in time for supper,” said both parents.

“We’re full of strawberry ice cream and hot dogs,” said the children, holding hands. “But we’ll sit and watch.”

“Yes, come tell us about the nursery,” said George Hadley.

The brother and sister blinked at him and then at each other. “Nursery?”

“All about Africa and everything,” said the father with false joviality.

“I don’t understand,” said Peter.

“Your mother and I were just traveling through Africa with rod and reel; Tom Swift and his

Electric Lion,” said George Hadley.

“There’s no Africa in the nursery,” said Peter simply.

“Oh, come now, Peter. We know better.”

“I don’t remember any Africa,” said Peter to Wendy. “Do you?”

“No.”

“Run see and come tell.”

She obeyed.

“Wendy, come back here!” said George Hadley, but she was gone. The house lights followed her like a flock of fireflies. Too late, he realized he had forgotten to lock the nursery door after his last inspection.

“Wendy’ll look and come tell us,” said Peter.

“She doesn’t have to tell me. I’ve seen it.”

“I’m sure you’re mistaken, Father.”

“I’m not, Peter. Come along now.”

But Wendy was back. “It’s not Africa,” she said breathlessly.

“We’ll see about this,” said George Hadley, and they all walked down the hall together and opened the nursery door.

There was a green, lovely forest, a lovely river, a purple mountain, high voices singing, and

Rima, lovely and mysterious, lurking in the trees with colorful flights of butterflies, like animated bouquets, lingering in her long hair. The African veldtland was gone. The lions were gone. Only

Rima was here now, singing a song so beautiful that it brought tears to your eyes.

George Hadley looked in at the changed scene. “Go to bed,” he said to the children.

They opened their mouths.

“You heard me,” he said.

They went off to the air closet, where a wind sucked them like brown leaves up the flue to their slumber rooms.

George Hadley walked through the singing glade and picked up something that lay in the corner near where the lions had been. He walked slowly back to his wife.

“What is that?” she asked.

“An old wallet of mine,” he said.

He showed it to her. The smell of hot grass was on it and the smell of a lion. There were drops of saliva on it, it had been chewed, and there were blood smears on both sides.

He closed the nursery door and locked it, tight.

In the middle of the night he was still awake and he knew his wife was awake. “Do you think

Wendy changed it?” she said at last, in the dark room.

“Of course.”

“Made it from a veldt into a forest and put Rima there instead of lions?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. But it’s staying locked until I find out.”

“How did your wallet get there?”

“I don’t know anything,” he said, “except that I’m beginning to be sorry we bought that room for the children. If children are neurotic at all, a room like that—”

“It’s supposed to help them work off their neuroses in a healthful way.”

“I’m starting to wonder.” He stared at the ceiling.

“We’ve given the children everything they ever wanted. Is this our reward—secrecy, disobedience?”

“Who was it said, ‘Children are carpets, they should be stepped on occasionally’? We’ve never lifted a hand. They’re insufferable—let’s admit it. They come and go when they like; they treat us as if we were offspring. They’re spoiled and we’re spoiled.”

“They’ve been acting funny ever since you forbade them to take the rocket to New York a few months ago.”

“They’re not old enough to do that alone, I explained.”

“Nevertheless, I’ve noticed they’ve been decidedly cool toward us since.”

“I think I’ll have David McClean come tomorrow morning to have a look at Africa.”

“But it’s not Africa now, it’s Green Mansions country and Rima.”

“I have a feeling it’ll be Africa again before then.”

A moment later they heard the screams.

Two screams. Two people screaming from downstairs. And then a roar of lions.

“Wendy and Peter aren’t in their rooms,” said his wife.

He lay in his bed with his beating heart. “No,” he said. “They’ve broken into the nursery.”

“Those screams—they sound familiar.”

“Do they?”

“Yes, awfully.”

And although their beds tried very hard, the two adults couldn’t be rocked to sleep for another hour. A smell of cats was in the night air.

“Father?” said Peter.

“Yes.”

Peter looked at his shoes. He never looked at his father any more, nor at his mother. “You aren’t going to lock up the nursery for good, are you?”

“That all depends.”

“On what?” snapped Peter.

“On you and your sister. If you intersperse this Africa with a little variety—oh, Sweden perhaps, or Denmark or China—”

“I thought we were free to play as we wished.”

“You are, within reasonable bounds.”

“What’s wrong with Africa, Father?”

“Oh, so now you admit you have been conjuring up Africa, do you?”

“I wouldn’t want the nursery locked up,” said Peter coldly. “Ever.”

“Matter of fact, we’re thinking of turning the whole house off for about a month. Live sort of a carefree one-for-all existence.”

“That sounds dreadful! Would I have to tie my own shoes instead of letting the shoe tier do it?

And brush my own teeth and comb my hair and give myself a bath?”

“It would be fun for a change, don’t you think?”

“No, it would be horrid. I didn’t like it when you took out the picture painter last month.”

“That’s because I wanted you to learn to paint all by yourself, son.”

“I don’t want to do anything but look and listen and smell; what else is there to do?”

“All right, go play in Africa.”

“Will you shut off the house sometime soon?”

“We’re considering it.”

“I don’t think you’d better consider it any more, Father.”

“I won’t have any threats from my son!”

“Very well.” And Peter strolled off to the nursery.

“Am I on time?” said David McClean.

“Breakfast?” asked George Hadley.

“Thanks, had some. What’s the trouble?”

“David, you’re a psychologist.”

“I should hope so.”

“Well, then, have a look at our nursery. You saw it a year ago when you dropped by; did you notice anything peculiar about it then?”

“Can’t say I did; the usual violences, a tendency toward a slight paranoia here or there, usual in children because they feel persecuted by parents constantly, but, oh, really nothing.”

They walked down the hall. “I locked the nursery up,” explained the father, “and the children broke back into it during the night. I let them stay so they could form the patterns for you to see.”

There was a terrible screaming from the nursery.

“There it is,” said George Hadley. “See what you make of it.”

They walked in on the children without rapping.

The screams had faded. The lions were feeding.

“Run outside a moment, children,” said George Hadley. “No, don’t change the mental combination. Leave the walls as they are. Get!”

With the children gone, the two men stood studying the lions clustered at a distance, eating

with great relish whatever it was they had caught.

“I wish I knew what it was,” said George Hadley. “Sometimes I can almost see. Do you think if I brought high-powered binoculars here and—”

David McClean laughed dryly. “Hardly.” He turned to study all four walls. “How long has this been going on?”

“A little over a month.”

“It certainly doesn’t feel good.”

“I want facts, not feelings.”

“My dear George, a psychologist never saw a fact in his life. He only hears about feelings; vague things. This doesn’t feel good, I tell you. Trust my hunches and my instincts. I have a nose for something bad. This is very bad. My advice to you is to have the whole damn room torn down and your children brought to me every day during the next year for treatment.”

“Is it that bad?”

“I’m afraid so. One of the original uses of these nurseries was so that we could study the patterns left on the walls by the child’s mind, study at our leisure, and help the child. In this case, however, the room has become a channel toward destructive thoughts, instead of a release away from them.”

“Didn’t you sense this before?”

“I sensed only that you had spoiled your children more than most. And now you’re letting them down in some way. What way?”

“I wouldn’t let them go to New York.”

“What else?”

“I’ve taken a few machines from the house and threatened them, a month ago, with closing up the nursery unless they did their homework. I did close it for a few days to show I meant business.”

“Ah, ha!”

“Does that mean anything?”

“Everything. Where before they had a Santa Claus now they have a Scrooge. Children prefer

Santas. You’ve let this room and this house replace you and your wife in your children’s affections.

This room is their mother and father, far more important in their lives than their real parents. And now you come along and want to shut it off. No wonder there’s hatred here. You can feel it coming out of the sky. Feel that sun. George, you’ll have to change your life. Like too many others, you’ve built it around creature comforts. Why, you’d starve tomorrow if something went wrong in your kitchen. You wouldn’t know how to tap an egg. Nevertheless, turn everything off. Start new. It’ll take time. But we’ll make good children out of bad in a year, wait and see.”

“But won’t the shock be too much for the children, shutting the room up abruptly, for good?”

“I don’t want them going any deeper into this, that’s all.”

The lions were finished with their red feast.

The lions were standing on the edge of the clearing watching the two men.

“Now I’m feeling persecuted,” said McClean. “Let’s get out of here. I never have cared for these damned rooms. Make me nervous.”

“The lions look real, don’t they?” said George Hadley. I don’t suppose there’s any way—”

“What?”

“—that they could become real?”

“Not that I know.”

“Some flaw in the machinery, a tampering or something?”

“No.”

They went to the door.

“I don’t imagine the room will like being turned off,” said the father.

“Nothing ever likes to die—even a room.”

“I wonder if it hates me for wanting to switch it off?”

“Paranoia is thick around here today,” said David McClean. “You can follow it like a spoor. Hello.”

He bent and picked up a bloody scarf. “This yours?”

“No.” George Hadley’s face was rigid. “It belongs to Lydia.”

They went to the fuse box together and threw the switch that killed the nursery.

The two children were in hysterics. They screamed and pranced and threw things. They yelled and sobbed and swore and jumped at the furniture.

“You can’t do that to the nursery, you can’t!”

“Now, children.”

The children flung themselves onto a couch, weeping.

“George,” said Lydia Hadley, “turn on the nursery, just for a few moments. You can’t be so abrupt.”

“No.”

“You can’t be so cruel...”

“Lydia, it’s off, and it stays off. And the whole damn house dies as of here and now. The more I see of the mess we’ve put ourselves in, the more it sickens me. We’ve been contemplating our mechanical, electronic navels for too long. My God, how we need a breath of honest air!”

And he marched about the house turning off the voice clocks, the stoves, the heaters, the shoe shiners, the shoe lacers, the body scrubbers and swabbers and massagers, and every other machine he could put his hand to.

The house was full of dead bodies, it seemed. It felt like a mechanical cemetery. So silent. None of the humming hidden energy of machines waiting to function at the tap of a button.

“Don’t let them do it!” wailed Peter at the ceiling, as if he was talking to the house, the nursery.

“Don’t let Father kill everything.” He turned to his father. “Oh, I hate you!”

“Insults won’t get you anywhere.”

“I wish you were dead!”

“We were, for a long while. Now we’re going to really start living. Instead of being handled and massaged, we’re going to live.”

Wendy was still crying and Peter joined her again. “Just a moment, just one moment, just another moment of nursery,” they wailed.

“Oh, George,” said the wife, “it can’t hurt.”

“All right—all right, if they’ll just shut up. One minute, mind you, and then off forever.”

“Daddy, Daddy, Daddy!” sang the children, smiling with wet faces.

“And then we’re going on a vacation. David McClean is coming back in half an hour to help us move out and get to the airport. I’m going to dress. You turn the nursery on for a minute, Lydia, just a minute, mind you.”

And the three of them went babbling off while he let himself be vacuumed upstairs through the air flue and set about dressing himself. A minute later Lydia appeared.

“I’ll be glad when we get away,” she sighed.

“Did you leave them in the nursery?”

“I wanted to dress too. Oh, that horrid Africa. What can they see in it?”

“Well, in five minutes we’ll be on our way to Iowa. Lord, how did we ever get in this house? What prompted us to buy a nightmare?”

“Pride, money, foolishness.”

“I think we’d better get downstairs before those kids get engrossed with those damned beasts again.”

Just then they heard the children calling, “Daddy, Mommy, come quick—quick!”

They went downstairs in the air flue and ran down the hall. The children were nowhere in sight.

“Wendy? Peter!”

They ran into the nursery. The veldtland was empty save for the lions waiting, looking at them.

“Peter, Wendy?”

The door slammed.

“Wendy, Peter!”

George Hadley and his wife whirled and ran back to the door.

“Open the door!” cried George Hadley, trying the knob. “Why, they’ve locked it from the outside!

Peter!” He beat at the door. “Open up!”

He heard Peter’s voice outside, against the door.

“Don’t let them switch off the nursery and the house,” he was saying.

Mr. and Mrs. George Hadley beat at the door. “Now, don’t be ridiculous, children. It’s time to go.

Mr. McClean’ll be here in a minute and...”

And then they heard the sounds.

The lions on three sides of them, in the yellow veldt grass, padding through the dry straw, rumbling and roaring in their throats.

The lions.

Mr. Hadley looked at his wife and they turned and looked back at the beasts edging slowly forward crouching, tails stiff.

Mr. and Mrs. Hadley screamed.

And suddenly they realized why those other screams had sounded familiar.

“Well, here I am,” said David McClean in the nursery doorway, “Oh, hello.” He stared at the two children seated in the center of the open glade eating a little picnic lunch. Beyond them was the water hole and the yellow veldtland; above was the hot sun. He began to perspire. “Where are your father and mother?”

The children looked up and smiled. “Oh, they’ll be here directly.”

“Good, we must get going.” At a distance Mr. McClean saw the lions fighting and clawing and then quieting down to feed in silence under the shady trees.

He squinted at the lions with his hand tip to his eyes.

Now the lions were done feeding. They moved to the water hole to drink.

A shadow flickered over Mr. McClean’s hot face. Many shadows flickered. The vultures were dropping down the blazing sky.

“A cup of tea?” asked Wendy in the silence.

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Cream by Haruki Murakami

So I'm telling a younger friend of mine about a strange incident that took place back when I was eighteen. I don't recall exactly why I brought it up. It just happened to come up as we were talking. I mean, it was something that happened long ago. Ancient history. On top of which, I was never able to reach any conclusion about it.

"I'd already graduated from high school then, but wasn't in college yet," I explained. "I was what's called an academic ronin, a student who fails the university entrance exam and is waiting to try again. Things felt kind of up in the air," I went on, "but that didn't bother me much. I knew that I could get into a halfway decent private college if I wanted to. But my parents had insisted that I try for a national university, so

I took the exam, knowing all along that it'd be a bust. And, sure enough, I failed. The national-university exam back then had a mandatory math section, and I had zero interest in calculus. I spent the next year basically killing time, as if I were creating an alibi. Instead of attending cram school to prepare to retake the exam, I hung out at the local library, plowing my way through thick novels. My parents must have assumed that I was studying there. But, hey, that's life. I found it a lot more enjoyable to read all of Balzac than to delve into the principles of calculus."

At the beginning of October that year, I received an invitation to a piano recital from a girl who'd been a year behind me in school and had taken piano lessons from the same teacher as I had. Once, the two of us had played a short four-hands piano piece by Mozart. When I turned sixteen, though, I'd stopped taking lessons, and I hadn't seen her after that. So I couldn't figure out why she'd sent me this invitation. Was she interested in me? No way. She was attractive, for sure, though not my type in terms of looks; she was always fashionably dressed and attended an expensive private girls' school. Not at all the kind to fall for a bland, run-of-the-mill guy like me.

When we played that piece together, she gave me a sour look every time I hit a wrong note. She was a better pianist than I was, and I tended to get overly tense, so when the two of us sat side by side and played I bungled a lot of notes. My elbow bumped against hers a few times as well. It wasn't such a difficult piece, and, moreover, I had the easier part. Each time I blew it, she had this *Give me a break* expression on her face. And she'd click her tongue—not loudly but loud enough that I could catch it. I can still hear that sound, even now. That sound may even have had something to do with my decision to give up the piano.

At any rate, my relationship with her was simply that we happened to study in the same piano school. We'd exchange hellos if we ran into each other there, but I have no memory of our ever sharing anything personal. So suddenly receiving an invitation to her recital (not a solo recital but a group recital with three pianists) took me completely by surprise—in fact, had me baffled. But one thing I had in abundance that year was time, so I sent off the reply postcard, saying that I would attend. One reason I did this

was that I was curious to find out what lay behind the invitation—if, indeed, there was a motive. Why, after all this time, send me an unexpected invitation? Maybe she had become much more skilled as a pianist and wanted to show me that. Or perhaps there was something personal that she wished to convey to me. In other words, I was still figuring out how best to use my sense of curiosity, and banging my head against all kinds of things in the process.

The recital hall was at the top of one of the mountains in Kobe. I took the Hankyu train line as close as I could, then boarded a bus that made its way up a steep, winding road. I got off at a stop near the very top, and after a short walk arrived at the modest-size concert venue, which was owned and managed by an enormous business conglomerate. I hadn't known that there was a concert hall here, in such an inconvenient spot, at the top of a mountain, in a quiet, upscale residential neighborhood. As you can imagine, there were plenty of things in the world that I didn't know about.

I'd felt that I should bring something to show my appreciation for having been invited, so at a florist's near the train station I had selected a bunch of flowers that seemed to fit the occasion and had them wrapped as a bouquet. The bus had shown up just then and I'd hopped aboard. It was a chilly Sunday afternoon. The sky was covered with thick gray clouds, and it looked as though a cold rain might start at any minute. There was no wind, though. I was wearing a thin, plain sweater under a gray herringbone jacket with a touch of blue, and I had a canvas bag slung across my shoulder. The jacket was too new, the bag too old and worn out. And in my hands was this gaudy bouquet of red flowers wrapped in cellophane. When I got on the bus decked out like that, the other passengers kept glancing at me. Or maybe it just seemed as if they did. I could feel my cheeks turning red. Back then, I blushed at the slightest provocation. And the redness took forever to go away.

"Why in the world am I here?" I asked myself, as I sat hunched over in my seat, cooling my flushed cheeks with my palms. I didn't particularly want to see this girl, or hear the piano recital, so why was I spending all my allowance on a bouquet, and travelling all the way to the top of a mountain on a dreary Sunday afternoon in November? Something must have been wrong with me when I dropped the reply postcard in the mailbox.

The higher up the mountain we went, the fewer passengers there were on the bus, and by the time we arrived at my stop only the driver and I were left. I got off the bus and followed the directions on the invitation up a gently sloping street. Each time I turned a corner, the harbor came briefly into view and then disappeared again. The overcast sky was a dull color, as if blanketed with lead. There were huge cranes down in the harbor, jutting into the air like the antennae of some ungainly creatures that had crawled out of the ocean.

The houses near the top of the slope were large and luxurious, with massive stone walls, impressive front gates, and two-car garages. The azalea hedges were all

neatly trimmed. I heard what sounded like a huge dog barking somewhere. It barked loudly three times, and then, as if someone had scolded it severely, it abruptly stopped, and all around became quiet.

As I followed the simple map on the invitation, I was struck by a vague, disconcerting premonition. Something just wasn't right. First of all, there was the lack of people in the street. Since getting off the bus, I hadn't seen a single pedestrian. Two cars did drive by, but they were on their way down the slope, not up. If a recital was really about to take place here, I would have expected to see more people. But the whole neighborhood was still and silent, as if the dense clouds above had swallowed up all sound.

Had I misunderstood?

I took the invitation out of my jacket pocket to recheck the information. Maybe I'd misread it. I went over it carefully, but couldn't find anything wrong. I had the right street, the right bus stop, the right date and time. I took a deep breath to calm myself, and set off again. The only thing I could do was get to the concert hall and see.

When I finally arrived at the building, the large steel gate was locked tight. A thick chain ran around the gate, and was held in place by a heavy padlock. No one else was around. Through a narrow opening in the gate, I could see a fair-sized parking lot, but not a single car was parked there. Weeds had sprouted between the paving stones, and the parking lot looked as if it hadn't been used in quite some time. Despite all that, the large nameplate at the entrance told me that this was indeed the recital hall I was looking for.

I pressed the button on the intercom next to the entrance but no one responded. I waited a bit, then pressed the button again, but still no answer. I looked at my watch. The recital was supposed to start in fifteen minutes. But there was no sign that the gate would be opened. Paint had peeled off it in spots, and it was starting to rust. I couldn't think of anything else to do, so I pressed the intercom button one more time, holding it down longer, but the result was the same as before—deep silence.

With no idea what to do, I leaned back against the gate and stood there for some ten minutes. I had a faint hope that someone else might show up before long. But no one came. There was no sign of any movement, either inside the gate or outside. There was no wind. No birds chirping, no dogs barking. As before, an unbroken blanket of gray cloud lay above.

I finally gave up—what else could I do?—and with heavy steps started back down the street toward the bus stop, totally in the dark about what was going on. The only clear thing about the whole situation was that there wasn't going to be a piano recital or any other event held here today. All I could do was head home, bouquet of red flowers in hand. My mother would doubtless ask, "What're the flowers for?," and I would have to give some plausible answer. I wanted to toss them in the trash bin at the station, but they were—for me, at least—kind of expensive to just throw away.

Down the hill a short distance, there was a cozy little park, about the size of a house lot. On the far side of the park, away from the street, was an angled natural rock wall. It was barely a park—it had no water fountain or playground equipment. All that was there was a little arbor, plunked down in the middle. The walls of the arbor were slanted latticework, overgrown with ivy. There were bushes around it, and flat square stepping stones on the ground. It was hard to say what the park's purpose was, but someone was regularly taking care of it; the trees and bushes were smartly clipped, with no weeds or trash around. On the way up the hill, I'd walked right by the park without noticing it.

I went into the park to gather my thoughts and sat down on a bench next to the arbor. I felt that I should wait in the area a little longer to see how things developed (for all I knew, people might suddenly appear), and once I sat down I realized how tired I was. It was a strange kind of exhaustion, as though I'd been worn out for quite a while but hadn't noticed it, and only now had it hit me. From the arbor, there was a panoramic view of the harbor. A number of large container ships were docked at the pier. From the top of the mountain, the stacked metal containers looked like nothing more than the small tins that you keep on your desk to hold coins or paper clips.

After a while, I heard a man's voice in the distance. Not a natural voice but one amplified by a loudspeaker. I couldn't catch what was being said, but there was a pronounced pause after each sentence, and the voice spoke precisely, without a trace of emotion, as if trying to convey something extremely important as objectively as possible. It occurred to me that maybe this was a personal message directed at me, and me alone. Someone was going to the trouble of telling me where I'd gone wrong, what it was that I'd overlooked. Not something I would normally have thought, but for some reason it struck me that way. I listened carefully. The voice got steadily louder and easier to understand. It must have been coming from a loudspeaker on the roof of a car that was slowly wending its way up the slope, seemingly in no hurry at all. Finally, I realized what it was: a car broadcasting a Christian message.

"Everyone will die," the voice said in a calm monotone. "Every person will eventually pass away. No one can escape death or the judgment that comes afterward. After death, everyone will be severely judged for his sins."

I sat there on the bench, listening to this message. I found it strange that anyone would do mission outreach in this deserted residential area up on top of a mountain. The people who lived here all owned multiple cars and were affluent. I doubted that they were seeking salvation from sin. Or maybe they were?

Income and status might be unrelated to sin and salvation.

"But all those who seek salvation in Jesus Christ and repent of their sins will have their sins forgiven by the Lord. They will escape the fires of Hell. Believe in God, for only those who believe in Him will reach salvation after death and receive eternal life."

I was waiting for the Christian-mission car to appear on the street in front of me and say more about the judgment after death. I think I must have been hoping to hear words spoken in a reassuring, resolute voice, no matter what they were. But the car never showed up. And, at a certain point, the voice began to grow quieter, less distinct, and before long I couldn't hear anything anymore. The car must have turned in another direction, away from where I was. When that car disappeared, I felt as though I'd been abandoned by the world.

A sudden thought hit me: maybe the whole thing was a hoax that the girl had cooked up. This idea—or hunch, I should say—came out of nowhere. For some reason that I couldn't fathom, she'd deliberately given me false information and dragged me out to the top of a remote mountain on a Sunday afternoon. Maybe I had done something that had caused her to form a personal grudge against me. Or maybe, for no special reason, she found me so unpleasant she couldn't stand it. And she'd sent me an invitation to a nonexistent recital and was now gloating—laughing her head off—seeing (or, rather, imagining) how she'd fooled me and how pathetic and ridiculous I must look.

O.K., but would a person really go to all the trouble of coming up with such a complicated plot in order to harass someone, just out of spite? Even printing up the postcard must have taken some effort. Could someone really be that mean? I couldn't remember a thing I'd ever done to make her hate me that much. But sometimes, without even realizing it, we trample on people's feelings, hurt their pride, make them feel bad. I speculated on the possibility of this not unthinkable hatred, the misunderstandings that might have taken place, but found nothing convincing. And as I wandered fruitlessly through this maze of emotions I felt my mind losing its way. Before I knew it, I was having trouble breathing. This used to happen to me once or twice a year. I think it must have been stress induced hyperventilation. Something would fluster me, my throat would constrict, and I wouldn't be able to get enough air into my lungs. I'd panic, as if I were being swept under by a rushing current and were about to drown, and my body would freeze. All I could do at those times was crouch down, close my eyes, and patiently wait for my body to return to its usual rhythms. As I got older, I stopped experiencing these symptoms (and, at some point, I stopped blushing so easily, too), but in my teens I was still troubled by these problems.

On the bench by the arbor, I screwed my eyes tightly shut, bent over, and waited to be freed from that blockage. It may have been five minutes, it may have been fifteen. I don't know how long. All the while, I watched as strange patterns appeared and vanished in the dark, and I slowly counted them, trying my best to get my breathing back under control. My heart beat out a ragged tempo in my rib cage, as if a terrified mouse were racing about inside.

I'd been focussing so much on counting that it took some time for me to become aware of the presence of another person. It felt as if someone were in front of me,

observing me. Cautiously, ever so slowly, I opened my eyes and raised my head a degree. My heart was still thumping.

Without my noticing, an old man had sat down on the bench across from me and was looking straight at me. It isn't easy for a young man to judge an elderly person's age. To me, they all just looked like old people. Sixty, seventy—what was the difference? They weren't young anymore, that was all. This man was wearing a bluish-gray wool cardigan, brown corduroy pants, and navy-blue sneakers. It looked as though a considerable amount of time had passed since any of these were new. Not that he appeared shabby or anything. His gray hair was thick and stiff-looking, and tufts sprung up above his ears like the wings of birds when they bathe. He wasn't wearing glasses. I didn't know how long he'd been there, but I had the feeling that he'd been observing me for quite some time.

I was sure he was going to say, "Are you all right?," or something like that, since I must have looked as if I were having trouble (and I really was). That was the first thing that sprang to mind when I saw the old man. But he didn't say a thing, didn't ask anything, just gripped a tightly folded black umbrella that he was holding like a cane. The umbrella had an amber-colored wooden handle and looked sturdy enough to serve as a weapon if need be. I assumed that he lived in the neighborhood, since he had nothing else with him.

I sat there trying to calm my breathing, the old man silently watching. His gaze didn't waver for an instant. It made me feel uncomfortable—as if I'd wandered into someone's back yard without permission—and I wanted to get up from the bench and head off to the bus stop as fast as I could. But, for some reason, I couldn't get to my feet. Time passed, and then suddenly the old man spoke.

"A circle with many centers."

I looked up at him. Our eyes met. His forehead was extremely broad, his nose pointed. As sharply pointed as a bird's beak. I couldn't say a thing, so the old man quietly repeated the words: "A circle with many centers." Naturally, I had no clue what he was trying to say. A thought came to me—that this man had been driving the Christian loudspeaker car. Maybe he'd parked nearby and was taking a break? No, that couldn't be it. His voice was different from the one I'd heard. The loudspeaker voice was a much younger man's. Or perhaps that had been a recording.

"Circles, did you say?" I reluctantly asked. He was older than me, and politeness dictated that I respond.

"There are several centers—no, sometimes an infinite number—and it's a circle with no circumference." The old man frowned as he said this, the wrinkles on his forehead deepening. "Are you able to picture that kind of circle in your mind?" My mind was still out of commission, but I gave it some thought. A circle that has several centers and no circumference. But, think as I might, I couldn't visualize it.

"I don't get it," I said.

The old man silently stared at me. He seemed to be waiting for a better answer. "I don't think they taught us about that kind of circle in math class," I feebly added.

The old man slowly shook his head. "Of course not. That's to be expected. Because they don't teach you that kind of thing in school. As you know very well."

As I knew very well? Why would this old man presume that?

"Does that kind of circle really exist?" I asked.

I realized that my breathing was back to normal, calm and steady. The rushing current was gone. Here and there, gaps had started to appear in the thick layer of clouds above the harbor. A ray of light had broken through, illuminating the aluminum housing on top of a crane, as if it had been accurately aiming at that one spot. I stared for a long while, transfixed by the almost mythic scene. The small bouquet of red flowers, wrapped in cellophane, was beside me. Like a kind of proof of all the strange things that had happened to me. I debated what to do with it, and ended up leaving it on the bench by the arbor. To me, that seemed the best option. I stood up and headed toward the bus stop where I'd got off earlier. The wind had started blowing, scattering the stagnant clouds above.

"Of course it does," the old man said, nodding a few times. "That circle does indeed exist. But not everyone can see it, you know."

"Can you see it?"

The old man didn't reply. My question hung awkwardly in the air for a moment, and finally grew hazy and disappeared.

The old man spoke again. "Listen, you've got to imagine it with your own power. Use all the wisdom you have and picture it. A circle that has many centers but no circumference. If you put in such an intense effort that it's as if you were sweating blood—that's when it gradually becomes clear what the circle is."

"It sounds difficult," I said.

"Of course it is," the old man said, sounding as if he were spitting out something hard. "There's nothing worth getting in this world that you can get easily." Then, as if starting a new paragraph, he briefly cleared his throat. "But, when you put in that much time and effort, if you do achieve that difficult thing it becomes the cream of your life."

"Cream?"

"In French, they have an expression: *crème de la crème*. Do you know it?"

"I don't," I said. I knew no French.

"The cream of the cream. It means the best of the best. The most important essence of life—that's the *crème de la crème*. Get it? The rest is just boring and worthless."

I didn't really understand what the old man was getting at. *Crème de la crème*?

"Think about it," the old man said. "Close your eyes again, and think it all through. A circle that has many centers but no circumference. Your brain is made to think about

difficult things. To help you get to a point where you understand something that you didn't understand at first. You can't be lazy or neglectful. Right now is a critical time. Because this is the period when your brain and your heart form and solidify."

I closed my eyes again and tried to picture that circle. I didn't want to be lazy or neglectful. But, no matter how seriously I thought about what the man was saying, it was impossible for me at that time to grasp the meaning of it. The circles I knew had one center, and a curved circumference connecting points that were equidistant from it. The kind of simple figure you can draw with a compass. Wasn't the kind of circle the old man was talking about the opposite of a circle?

I didn't think that the old man was off, mentally. And I didn't think that he was teasing me. He wanted to convey something important. So I tried again to understand, but my mind just spun around and around, making no progress. How could a circle that had many (or perhaps an infinite number of) centers exist as a circle? Was this some advanced philosophical metaphor? I gave up and opened my eyes. I needed more clues.

But the old man wasn't there anymore. I looked all around, but there was no sign of anyone in the park. It was as if he'd never existed. Was I imagining things?

No, of course it wasn't some fantasy. He'd been right there in front of me, tightly gripping his umbrella, speaking quietly, posing a strange question, and then he'd left.

I realized that my breathing was back to normal, calm and steady. The rushing current was gone. Here and there, gaps had started to appear in the thick layer of clouds above the harbor. A ray of light had broken through, illuminating the aluminum housing on top of a crane, as if it had been accurately aiming at that one spot. I stared for a long while, transfixed by the almost mythic scene.

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After I finished telling this story, there was a pause, then my younger friend said, "I don't really get it. What actually happened, then? Was there some intention or principle at work?"

Those very odd circumstances I experienced on top of that mountain in Kobe on a Sunday afternoon in late autumn—following the directions on the invitation to where the recital was supposed to take place, only to discover that the building was deserted—what did it all mean? And why did it happen? That was what my friend was asking. Perfectly natural questions, especially because the story I was telling him didn't reach any conclusion.

"I don't understand it myself, even now," I admitted.

It was permanently unsolved, like some ancient riddle. What took place that day was incomprehensible, inexplicable, and at eighteen it left me bewildered and mystified. So much so that, for a moment, I nearly lost my way.

"But I get the feeling," I said, "that principle or intention wasn't really the issue."

My friend looked confused. "Are you telling me that there's no need to know what it was all about?"

I nodded.

"But if it were me," he said, "I'd be bothered no end. I'd want to know the truth, why something like that happened. If I'd been in your shoes, that is."

"Yeah, of course. Back then, it bothered me, too. A lot. It hurt me, too. But thinking about it later, from a distance, after time had passed, it came to feel insignificant, not worth getting upset about. I felt as though it had nothing at all to do with the cream of life."

"The cream of life," he repeated.

"Things like this happen sometimes," I told him. "Inexplicable, illogical events that nevertheless are deeply disturbing. I guess we need to not think about them, just close our eyes and get through them. As if we were passing under a huge wave."

My younger friend was quiet for a time, considering that huge wave. He was an experienced surfer, and there were lots of things, serious things, that he had to consider when it came to waves. Finally, he spoke. "But not thinking about anything might also be pretty hard."

"You're right. It might be hard indeed."

There's nothing worth getting in this world that you can get easily, the old man had said, with unshakable conviction, like Pythagoras explaining his theorem.

"About that circle with many centers but no circumference," my friend asked.

"Did you ever find an answer?"

"Good question," I said. I slowly shook my head. Had I?

In my life, whenever an inexplicable, illogical, disturbing event takes place (I'm not saying that it happens often, but it has a few times), I always come back to that circle—the circle with many centers but no circumference. And, as I did when I was eighteen, on that arbor bench, I close my eyes and listen to the beating of my heart.

Sometimes I feel that I can sort of grasp what that circle is, but a deeper understanding eludes me. This circle is, most likely, not a circle with a concrete, actual form but, rather, one that exists only within our minds. When we truly love somebody, or feel deep compassion, or have an idealistic sense of how the world should be, or when we discover faith (or something close to faith)—that's when we understand the circle as a given and accept it in our hearts. Admittedly, though, this is nothing more than my own vague attempt to reason it out.

Your brain is made to think about difficult things. To help you get to a point where you understand something that you didn't understand at first. And that becomes the

cream of your life. The rest is boring and worthless. That was what the gray-haired old man told me. On a cloudy Sunday afternoon in late autumn, on top of a mountain in Kobe, as I clutched a small bouquet of red flowers. And even now, whenever something disturbing happens to me, I ponder again that special circle, and *the boring and the worthless*. And the unique cream that must be there, deep inside me.

♦ (Translated, from the Japanese, by Philip Gabriel.)

LATHER AND NOTHING ELSE

Hernando Téllez

He came in without a word. I was stropping my best razor. And when I recognized him, I started to shake. But he did not notice. To cover my nervousness, I went on honing the razor. I tried the edge with the tip of my thumb and took another look at it against the light.

Meanwhile, he was taking off his cartridge-studded belt with the pistol holster suspended from it. He put it on a hook in the wardrobe and hung his cap above it. Then he turned full around toward me and, loosening his tie, remarked, "It's hot as the devil. I want a shave." With that he took his seat.

I estimated he had a four-days' growth of beard—the four days he had been gone on the last foray after our men. His face looked burnt, tanned by the sun.

I started to work carefully on the shaving soap. I scraped some slices from the cake, dropped them into the mug, then added a little lukewarm water, and stirred with the brush. The lather soon began to rise.

"The fellows in the troop must have just about as much beard as I." I went on stirring up lather.

"But we did very well, you know. We caught the leaders. Some of them we brought back dead; others are still alive. But they'll all be dead soon."

"How many did you take?" I asked.

"Fourteen. We had to go pretty far in to find them. But now they're paying for it. And not one will escape; not a single one."

He leaned back in the chair when he saw the brush in my hand, full of lather. I had not yet put the sheet on him. I was certainly flustered. Taking a sheet from the drawer, I tied it around my customer's neck.

He went on talking. He evidently took it for granted that I was on the side of the existing regime.

"The people must have gotten a scare with what happened the other day," he said.

"Yes," I replied, as I finished tying the knot against his nape, which smelt of sweat.

"Good show, wasn't it?"

"Very good," I answered, turning my attention now to the brush. The man closed his eyes wearily and awaited the cool caress of the lather.

I had never had him so close before. The day he ordered the people to file through the schoolyard to look upon the four rebels hanging there, my path had crossed his briefly. But the sight of those mutilated bodies kept me from paying

attention to the face of the man who had been directing it all and whom I now had in my hands.

It was not a disagreeable face, certainly. And the beard, which aged him a bit, was not unbecoming. His name was Torres. Captain Torres.

I started to lay on the first coat of lather. He kept his eyes closed.

"I would love to catch a nap," he said, "but there's a lot to be done this evening."

I lifted the brush and asked, with pretended indifference: "A firing party?"

"Something of the sort," he replied, "but slower."

"All of them?"

"No, just a few."

I went on lathering his face. My hands began to tremble again. The man could not be aware of this, which was lucky for me. But I wished he had not come in. Probably many of our men had seen him enter the shop. And with the enemy in my house I felt a certain responsibility.

I would have to shave his beard just like any other, carefully, neatly, just as though he were a good customer, taking heed that not a single pore should emit a drop of blood. Seeing to it that the blade did not slip in the small whorls. Taking care that the skin was left clean, soft, shining, so that when I passed the back of my hand over it, not a single hair should be felt. Yes. I was secretly a revolutionary, but at the same time I was a conscientious barber, proud of the way I did my job. And that four-day beard presented a challenge.

I took up the razor, opened the handle wide, releasing the blade, and started to work, downward from one sideburn. The blade responded to perfection. The hair was tough and hard; not very long, but thick. Little by little the skin began to show through. The razor gave out its usual sound as it gathered up layers of soap mixed with bits of hair. I paused to wipe it clean, and taking up the strop once more went about improving its edge, for I am a painstaking barber.

The man, who had kept his eyes closed, now opened them, put a hand out from under the sheet, felt of the part of his face that was emerging from the lather, and said to me, "Come at six o'clock this evening to the school."

"Will it be like the other day?" I asked, stiff with horror.

"It may be even better," he replied.

"What are you planning to do?"

"I'm not sure yet. But we'll have a good time."

Once more he leaned back and shut his eyes. I came closer, the razor on high.

"Are you going to punish all of them?" I timidly ventured.

"Yes, all of them."

The lather was drying on his face. I must hurry. Through the mirror, I took a look at the street. It appeared about as usual: there was the grocery shop with two or three customers. Then I glanced at the clock: two-thirty.

The razor kept descending. Now from the other sideburn downward. It was a blue beard, a thick one. He should let it grow like some poets, or some priests. It

would suit him well. Many people would not recognize him. And that would be a good thing for him, I thought, as I went gently over all the throat line. At this point you really had to handle your blade skillfully, because the hair, while scantier, tended to fall into small whorls. It was a curly beard. The pores might open, minutely, in this area and let out a tiny drop of blood. A good barber like myself stakes his reputation on not permitting that to happen to any of his customers.

And this was indeed a special customer. How many of ours had he sent to their death? How many had he mutilated? It was best not to think about it. Torres did not know I was his enemy. Neither he nor the others knew it. It was a secret shared by very few, just because that made it possible for me to inform the revolutionaries about Torres' activities in the town and what he planned to do every time he went on one of his raids to hunt down rebels. So it was going to be very difficult to explain how it was that I had him in my hands and then let him go in peace, alive, clean-shaven.

His beard had now almost entirely disappeared. He looked younger, several years younger than when he had come in. I suppose that always happens to men who enter and leave barbershops. Under the strokes of my razor Torres was rejuvenated; yes, because I am a good barber, the best in this town, and I say this in all modesty.

A little more lather here under the chin, on the Adam's apple, right near the great vein. How hot it is! Torres must be sweating just as I am. But he is not afraid. He is a tranquil man, who is not even giving thought to what he will do to his prisoners this evening. I, on the other hand, polishing his skin with this razor but avoiding the drawing of blood, careful with every stroke—I cannot keep my thoughts in order.

Confound the hour he entered my shop! I am a revolutionary but not a murderer. And it would be so easy to kill him. He deserves it. Or does he? No, damn it! No one deserves the sacrifice others make in becoming assassins. What is to be gained by it? Nothing. Others and still others keep coming, and the first kill the second, and then these kill the next, and so on until everything becomes a sea of blood. I could cut his throat, so, swish, swish! He would not even have time to moan, and with his eyes shut he would not even see the shine of the razor or the gleam in my eye.

But I'm shaking like a regular murderer. From his throat a stream of blood would flow on the sheet, over the chair, down on my hands, onto the floor. I would have to close the door. But the blood would go flowing, along the floor, warm, indelible, not to be stanchd, until it reached the street, like a small scarlet river.

I'm sure that with a good strong blow, a deep cut, he would feel no pain. He would not suffer at all. And what would I do then with the body? Where would I hide it? I would have to flee, leave all this behind, take shelter far away, very far away. But they would follow until they caught up with me. "The murderer of

Captain Torres. He slit his throat while he was shaving him. What a cowardly thing to do!”

And others would say, “The avenger of our people. A name to remember”—my name here. “He was the town barber. No one knew he was fighting for our cause.”

And so, which will it be? Murderer or hero? My fate hangs on the edge of this razor blade. I can turn my wrist slightly, put a bit more pressure on the blade, let it sink in. The skin will yield like silk, like rubber, like the strop. There is nothing more tender than a man’s skin, and the blood is always there, ready to burst forth. A razor like this cannot fail. It is the best one I have.

But I don’t want to be a murderer. No, sir. You came in to be shaved. And I do my work honorably. I don’t want to stain my hands with blood. Just with lather, and nothing else. You are an executioner; I am only a barber. Each one to his job. That’s it. Each one to his job.

The chin was now clean, polished, soft. The man got up and looked at himself in the glass. He ran his hand over the skin and felt its freshness, its newness.

“Thanks,” he said. He walked to the wardrobe for his belt, his pistol, and his cap. I must have been very pale, and I felt my shirt soaked with sweat. Torres finished adjusting his belt buckle, straightened his gun in its holster, and, smoothing his hair mechanically, put on his cap. From his trousers pocket he took some coins to pay for the shave. And he started toward the door. On the threshold he stopped for a moment, and turning toward me he said:

“They told me you would kill me. I came to find out if it was true. But it’s not easy to kill. I know what I’m talking about.”

Reprinted from *Américas*, a bimonthly magazine published in English and Spanish by the General Secretariat of the Organization of American States.

I cried as we walked down the secret staircase and through the dark, quiet hallways of the music school. Takashi found his violin and I found my composition notebook in the place we'd left them, under a table in the concert hall where the orchestra had rehearsed.

Outside it was a warm and pleasant evening, like nothing was wrong. Takashi waved good-bye at the bus stop and I walked to the tram. At home, I sat in the kitchen and my mother gave me a cold boiled potato, black instant coffee, and a small container of diet yogurt.

"You should try harder to please me," she said. "For your own good."

"I'll try harder," I told her. "I promise."

But I never did try very hard to please my mother. In fact, I never tried hard to please anybody at all after that day in the locked room. Now I only try hard to please myself. That is all that matters here. That is the secret thing I found.

A BETTER PLACE

come from some other place. It's not like a real place on Earth or something I could point to on a map, if I even had a map of this other place, which I don't. There's no map because the place isn't a place like something to be near or in or at. It's not somewhere or anywhere, but it's not nowhere either. There is no *where* about it. I don't know what it is. But it certainly isn't this place, here on Earth, with all you silly people. I wish I knew what it was, not because I think it would be great to tell you about it; I just miss it so much. If I knew what it was, maybe I could make something like it here on Earth. Waldemar says it's impossible. The only way to get there is to go.

"Waldemar," I say to my brother. "How do we get back to the place, to the thing, whatever?"

"Oh, you have to die. Or you have to kill the right person."

That's his answer now. For a long time he

thought only the first part was true, but over time he's thought long and hard and figured out that there is a second way. The second way is much harder. I don't know how he figured it out, but thank God for Waldemar, who is so much wiser than me, though only a day older. I took some extra time to come out of the woman. I had doubts, even so early on, about this place here on Earth with all the dumb things everywhere. It was Waldemar who persuaded me to come out finally. I could hear his cries and feel his little fists poking through the woman's skin. He is my best friend. Everything he does, it seems, he does because he loves me. He is the best brother ever, of all brothers here on Earth. I love him so much.

"Well, I don't want to die," I tell him. "Not yet. Not here."

We talk about this from time to time. It's nothing new.

"Then you've got to find the right person to kill. Once you've killed the right person, a hole will open up in the Earth and you can just walk straight into the hole. It will lead you through a tunnel back to where we came from. But be careful. If you kill the wrong person, you'll get into trouble here. It wouldn't be good. I'd visit you in prison, but chances are slim that the right person will be sitting beside you in your prison cell. And the prisons they have for little girls are the worst. There, the only way to the place would be to die. So you've got to be really sure about the person to kill. It's the hardest thing to do, to be so sure about something like that. I've never been sure enough, and that's why I'm still here. That, and because I'd miss you and I'd worry if I left you all alone."

"Maybe I'll just die after all," I say. I get so tired of it here, thinking of how much better it is back there, in the place we came from. I cry about it often. Waldemar always has to soothe me.

"I could kill you," he offers. "But I'm not sure you're the right person. But wouldn't that be great? If you were?"

"That would be ideal!" I say.

I don't know what I'd do without my brother. I'd probably cry even more than I do now, and take poisons that make my brain weak and my body tired so I wouldn't even have the strength to think about the other place. I'd try to poison the place out of my mind. But I doubt that's even possible. Some nights I hate it here so much I shake and sweat and my brother holds me down so I won't start kicking the walls or breaking things. When I kick the walls, the woman gets angry. "What's going on up there, children?" She thinks we're fighting and threatens to separate us. She doesn't know about the other place. She's just a human woman, after all. She gives us food and clothes and everything, as human mothers like to do. My brother says he's sure the woman is not the person he could kill to get back to the place. I'm not so sure she's not my person. Sometimes I think she is. But if I killed her and I was wrong, I'd be sorry. Mostly I'd be sorry for Waldemar.

One morning as we lie in our beds, I say to my brother, "Waldemar, I think I know who my person is." I don't really

know. I am still sort of dreaming. But then I think up a name to say. "His name is Jarek Jaskolka and I'm going to find him and kill him, mark my words."

"But are you sure?" my brother asks.

"I think so," I say. And then, suddenly, I am sure. Jarek Jaskolka is the person I have to kill. I know it in my bones. I am as sure about Jarek Jaskolka as I am about the place, and about me and Waldemar being from there.

"You must be completely sure," my brother warns me. He rises from his bed and lifts the blanket over his head like an old lady going to the market. His face becomes dark and his voice suddenly low and frightening. "If you aren't sure, you could get in trouble, you know."

"You look like a witch, Waldemar. Don't make me laugh at you," I say. Waldemar doesn't like to be ridiculed.

"If you kill the wrong person . . ." he begins.

But I am sure now. I can't go back and pretend I'm not. I have to return to the place somehow. I miss it too much. My brain hurts and I cry all the time. I don't want to be here on Earth for one moment longer.

"It's that damned Jarek Jaskolka!" I cry. It is just a name I've made up, but it is the right name, that I am sure of. I jump from my bed. I pull the string to lift the curtains. The room where Waldemar and I sleep looks out into the forest. Outside, soft gray clouds hang between the trees. Some silly birds sing a few nice notes. I miss the other place so much, I want to cry. But I feel brave. "I will find you, Jarek," I say to the window. "Wherever you are hiding!"

When I look at Waldemar, he has gone back under his covers. I can see his chest rising and falling. My brain hurts too much to try to comfort him. And anyway, there is no comfort here on Earth. There is pretending, there are words, but there is no peace. Nothing is good here. Nothing. Every place you go on Earth, there is more nonsense.

For breakfast the woman gives us bowls of warm fresh yogurt and warm fresh bread and tea with sugar and lemon, and for Waldemar a slice of onion cooked in honey because he has been coughing.

"Jarek Jaskolka," I whisper to remind myself that I will soon be far away from this place and all its horrors. Every time I say the name out loud, my head feels a little better. "Jarek Jaskolka," I say to Waldemar. He smiles sadly.

The woman, hearing me say Jarek Jaskolka's name, drops her long wooden spoon. It skitters across the kitchen floor, dripping with the tasty yogurt. She comes at me.

"Urszula," she says. "How do you know this name? Where did you hear it? What have you done?" She isn't angry, as she so often is. Her face looks white and her eyes are wide. She holds her lips tight and frowns, holding me by the shoulders. She is scared.

"Oh, he is just some person," I say, batting my eyes so she cannot see the murder in them.

"Jarek Jaskolka is a bad, bad man," the woman says, shaking me. I stop blinking. "If you see him on the street, you run away. You hide from him. Jarek Jaskolka likes to do bad things. I know because he lived on Grjicheva, next door to

my house before they tore it down for the tramway when I was little. Many girls came away from his house black and blue and bloodied. You have seen my marks?"

"Oh no, Mother!" cries Waldemar. "Don't show her those!"

But it is too late. The woman pulls her skirt up past one knee and points. There they are, marks like swollen earthworms, enough of them to make a lump from the side, the poor woman.

"Jarek Jaskolka will do the same to you," she says. "Now go to school and don't be stupid. And if you meet that bad man on the street, run away like a good girl. And you, too, Waldemar. Who knows what Jarek Jaskolka is up to now?"

It is usual for the woman to get in the way of good things I want to do.

"Jarek Jaskolka made those marks on the woman, but so what?" I ask Waldemar on the walk to school. "What's so bad about some measly marks?"

"You don't want those marks," Waldemar answers. "You'll end up like Mother, always angry. She only has bad dreams."

"But I have bad dreams already," I say. "All my dreams are about this place here and all the boring, stupid things and people."

"You take it too hard," Waldemar says. "Things here aren't so bad. Anyway, what if the other place is no better? You could go back there and be just as troubled."

"Impossible," I say. But I wonder. "What do you think

Jarek Jaskolka did to the woman? How did the marks get there?"

"There are things men do. Nobody knows. It's like a magic act. Nobody can solve it."

It doesn't sound so bad to me. Magic acts are easy to solve. There is an old man in the town square who eats fire and makes the crows that mill under the big tree there disappear in a puff of smoke. Any fool can see that they've just flown up into the branches to hide.

"Will you help me find Jarek Jaskolka?" I ask Waldemar. "I really want to get out of here. Even though I'll miss you when I'm gone."

"I'll try," he answers and frowns. He is angry at me, I can tell. When my brother is angry, he plucks the poison berries from the bushes on the road and puts them up his nose. Everybody knows that's where the brain is, up the nose there. Waldemar likes to poison his brain that way. It makes him feel better to do that. I myself like to swallow the poison berries like tablets. So because Waldemar is plucking berries, I pluck berries, too, and swallow them one by one. They are soft and cold. If I snag one on my fang, goop spills out and tastes bitter, like the poison that it is.

At school we sit at different tables. At chorus I can see Waldemar's mouth moving, but I know he isn't singing the song. When we file out of the big stone church, I ask Waldemar again. "Will you help me find him? Not just for me, but for the woman. Maybe if I kill him, the woman won't be so angry all the time. It seems she holds quite a grudge."

"I won't help you," says Waldemar. "And don't try to cheer me up. You'd better think of a way to kill him when you find him. I'm not going to help you do that."

Waldemar is right. I'll need some kind of knife to kill Jarek Jaskolka with. I'll need the sharpest knife I can find. And I'll need poison. The poison berries from the bush make our brains just a little sleepy, but that is all they do. If I make Jarek Jaskolka eat many poison berries, maybe he will fall asleep, and then I can kill him with the knife, step into the hole, and go back to the place at last. This is my plan.

On the walk home with Waldemar that day after school, I fill my skirt with poison berries. I look like a farmer girl holding my skirt up like that. I tell Waldemar to fill his pockets with berries, but he says they will get squished, and anyway, I have picked enough to kill Jarek Jaskolka already.

"Really? This is enough to kill him?" I ask my brother.

"Oh, I don't know. Don't ask me." Waldemar is still so angry. I don't blame him. I try to sing a funny song as we turn the corner and cross the town square, but Waldemar covers his ears.

"Sorry, Waldemar," I say. But I don't feel sorry. Sometimes Waldemar loves me too much. He thinks it is better I stay with him on Earth, rather than be happy in the other place without him. "When you die, we'll be together again," I say, trying to console him. "Or maybe you'll find your person to kill. Don't give up." My legs are cold as we walk the rest of the way home. But I have so many poison berries.

I am happy. "I'll make poison berry jam," I say. "I've seen the woman do it with cherries."

"She will never let you use her pot," Waldemar says. He looks at me. I know I could persuade Waldemar to help me make the jam, but I don't want to. When he is angry with me, I feel he loves me even more, and that feels good to me, even though it also feels so bad.

When we get home, the woman is outside hanging wet clothes on the line of rope between the trees. I imagine the marks on her thighs again. They are like welts, like slugs crawling up her leg. My thighs are like my arms. They are just skin and flesh with no marks. They are clean blank skin and flesh. Nothing is ever going to crawl up them, not ever, I decide. I'd die before I let anyone give me marks like the woman's, I decide. Even if they are just marks of magic. I hide my skirt of poison berries behind Waldemar as we pass and wave to the woman. We go inside the house. I pull a big black pot from the cupboard and fill it with the poison berries.

"How do you make jam, Waldemar?" I ask my brother.

"Add sugar and cook it for a long time."

"Oh, I love sugar," I say. "I'll do it tonight while the woman is sleeping."

"You better not taste too much of it. Don't forget, when you cook it, the poison gets stronger."

"Will you help me remember, Waldemar?"

"No," he says and puts a few more poison berries up his nose. "I have to sleep at night. If I don't sleep, I feel sick during the day. I don't like feeling sick at school."

"Oh, poor little Waldemar," I say, mocking him. I swallow a few of the berries and drag the pot into our bedroom and hide it in the closet.

When the woman comes back in from hanging the clothes, she says, "Go play outdoors, children. Waldemar, go run around while the sun is still shining. Urszula, go and be energetic. You look so serious. You look like an old lady. Go out and have fun. It's good for you."

"I don't like fun," I say.

Waldemar snorts and goes outside to play. I want to play with Waldemar, but I have to stay in my room to guard my pot of poison berries in the closet. If the woman finds it, she'll start asking questions. She'll get in the way of my killing Jarek Jaskolka, and then I'll be stuck here on Earth with her forever. I can imagine what she'll say if she discovers my plan. "There is something wrong with you, Urszula."

"No," I will tell her. "There is something wrong with this place. There is something wrong with you and everybody here. There is nothing, nothing, nothing wrong with me."

And anyway, I still have to find Jarek Jaskolka. I can't kill him if I don't know where he is, after all. While Waldemar is still outside playing, I go to the kitchen. It smells like cooking rice and parsley.

"Hello," I say to the woman. "Jarek Jaskolka, does he still live on Grjicheva?"

"Of course not. Unless he lives in a hole in the ground. All the houses got torn down there. I hope he moved very far away. His sister is the lady in the library."

"That big fatso?"

"Don't be cruel."

"I think I need a book to read," I say.

"Then go, go," the woman says angrily. "I don't know what you're up to, but remember what I said about Jarek Jaskolka. Remember the marks. But go, do what you want, as if I care."

"You're angry at me now because I want to read a book?"

"Urszula is Urszula," is all she says. She leaves the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron, and goes outside to watch Waldemar build a tower of pinecones. The woman is mean and stupid, I think. The entire world is stupid. I find a sharp butcher knife in the drawer and take it to my room and hide it in my satchel. I kick at the walls for a while. Then I start off for the library to find the fat sister of the man I am going to kill.

"Jaskolka?" the fat woman asks. "I don't use that name anymore. What do you want? Why are you asking?"

"I'm just curious. What happened when they tore your house down for the tramway? My mother lived on Grjicheva once, too."

"Whose daughter are you?" the fat lady asks.

"My name is Urszula" is all I say.

"Those houses on Grjicheva were all poor and ugly and it's a good thing they're gone now or else they'd just crumble down over our heads and kill us."

"Kill you?" I ask.

"We moved to a small apartment near the river, if you must know."

"You and your family? And your brother?"

She puts down the rubber stamp in her hand and closes the book on the counter. The sunlight through the windows falls on her face as she leans toward me.

"What do you know about my brother? What is it? Why are you asking me these questions?"

"I'm looking for Jarek Jaskolka," I say. The lady is so fat and lazy looking, it seems not to matter what I tell her. "I have to kill him."

The lady laughs and picks up her rubber stamp again. "Go right ahead," she says. "He lives up the street in the house across from the cemetery. He'll be pleased to have a visitor. You can't imagine how pleased he'll be."

"I'm going to kill him," I tell the lady. She just laughs.

"Good luck. And don't come running back here full of tears," she says. "Curious girls get what they deserve."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't listen to me."

"I will kill him dead, you know," I say. "That's why I'm curious."

"Do what you can," she says. "Now be quiet. People are trying to read."

On my way home, I walk through the cemetery, past my father's grave, and I look through the windows of what I guess is Jarek Jaskolka's house. The sun is setting, and the sky is beautiful colors and I wish Waldemar were there with me, holding my hand. "Why is it, Waldemar," I would ask him, "that when something here is so beautiful, I just want to die?"

"Because it reminds you of the other place," Waldemar would say to me. "The most beautiful place of all."

Jarek Jaskolka's house is clapboard painted cloudy green like pond water, and the windows facing the road are covered by a dark curtain. The front steps are missing, and in place of the steps there are big broken pieces of cement piled on top of one another. There are dry bushes around the house full of orange meadowlarks. I pick up a little rock and throw it at Jarek Jaskolka's window, but the glass doesn't break. The rock just makes a little *ding* sound against the glass. The meadowlarks start to chirp at me, whining like babies crying. I don't care. I could throw rocks at them if I wanted. I could crush them with the heel of my shoe. I wait, hiding in the bushes, waiting to see if anything will happen. Then I throw another rock. This time, Jarek Jaskolka comes to the window. I watch him pull the curtain back. His big wrinkled hand grips the dark cloth, and just for a moment, I see his face. He looks like any normal grandfather, eyes drooping, white beard, wrinkled cheeks, and a nose like a melted candle. When he moves away from the window, his fingernails tap against the glass.

They are long and yellow like an ogre's. But it's clear he's just a feeble old man. It will be easy to feed him the jam, then hack him up with a knife, I figure. Old men are easy to hack. Their flesh is like an old limp carrot. But if Waldemar is right about the black hole opening up, and if Jarek Jaskolka is really my right person, then I don't have to worry about hacking him up all the way. Maybe one hack will be enough to kill him and I can just jump down into the hole and go back to the other place.

When the curtain falls back across the window, I run away, back through the cemetery, kicking at the stones that mark whatever silly people have come and gone, and I wonder where they've gone off to, if there are other places for each of us, and whether my father is really, as the woman has always told us, in a better place than this.

That night the woman is angry at me again. She wants to know what I was reading at the library. "I hope you didn't get some book that's going to fill you up with crazy notions."

"I didn't find any good books at the library," I say. "They were all boring. They were all dumb."

"Ach, Urszula," the woman says. "You think you're smarter than all the rest."

"But aren't I? Who is smarter than me? Show me the person. Don't you always say—" The woman has always said not to mind other children at school when they tease

me, and that I am the smartest, and the best, forever and ever, amen.

"Forget what I always say," says the woman. "You need to learn respect."

"Respect for what? For you?"

"God forbid!" She turns her back and hacks at a loaf of bread with a butcher knife. It isn't as big as the butcher knife I've stolen, though. I can't wait to kill Jarek Jaskolka and leave this place, I think. Again I wish that the woman would be my person to kill. But she isn't. I am pretty sure of that by now.

"And you, Waldemar," the woman says when she turns around. "Who stole your candy? Why are you frowning like a lost little child?"

Waldemar looks sad with his soup spoon in his fist. He won't look at me. He takes a chunk of bread from the woman and doesn't answer.

"Did you do something?" the woman asks me. "Did you hurt my special boy?"

"I would never do anything to hurt Waldemar. Why would I? I love him the most."

"Sometimes you can be rough, Urszula. You don't show love the best way. When was the last time you did something nice for me? When was the last time you said 'thank you?'"

Waldemar stands and leaves the table.

"Waldemar, come back, please. Your soup will get cold," the woman says gently.

"Let him go," I tell her. "He's crying because of those marks you showed us. He thinks it's his fault. But it's yours."

I really think I am just so smart.

The woman sits and lowers her face so that it is dark and sad and I can see her spirit rise up a little from her body, like it doesn't want to be here either, like it has some better place to go.

"Jarek Jaskolka," I say softly, reaching my hand out to touch the woman's soft knee under the table.

"Ach!" she says, flinching. The legs of her chair scrape on the floor as she pushes herself away. "Pest," she calls me and stands up and goes around the kitchen, opening and closing cabinets. I think she might be looking for the iron pot I've hidden in the closet. But she doesn't ask if I've taken it. Nor does she notice her big butcher knife is gone. She puts the bread in the bread box and takes my bowl of soup away, spills it in the sink, unties her apron, and goes and stands by the window, staring out at nothing, it seems, just the darkness between the trees.

That night I have a dream about the old magician in the town square. He is showing me his tricks. "Like so," he grumbles and shakes into my hand a pile of little pellets. When I drop them on the ground, they explode into puffs of smoke. "These are made from moonstones," he says. He points up into the dark night sky. "You see that darkness? And you see the moonlight? There isn't one without the other." I guess I say some-

thing to show an interest in how his magic is possible, even though I know it's just a sham. "You're just a little child," he says. "Why are you so concerned with what you don't yet know?"

I wake up, and there is Waldemar sleeping in his bed beside me. It is very dark and quiet in the room. The woman is asleep in her bed on the other side of the wall. I can hear her snoring. At night, the noise from her nose is like a locomotive chugging. We are used to it. I think the noise from her nose is so enormous because her brain wants to take a train far away from here. I know she isn't happy. She likes Waldemar but she doesn't like me. It seems well enough that I leave this place. It will make her happy, I feel, if I leave. But it will make Waldemar so sad.

As quietly as I can, I drag the big pot of berries from the closet and take it to the kitchen. I light a fire on the stove and set the pot on the flame and drag a chair to the stove so I can stand on it and stir the berries. I pour a cup of sugar in and stir and listen to the berries singe and steam. The only light comes from a few lone stars through the darkened windows and the blue fire from the burner. "Jarek, this is for you," I say under my breath and inhale the poison-berry smell. My brain is comforted a little by the smell. My eyes are drowsy. But I keep stirring. I feel sad there all alone in the dark kitchen. I wish Waldemar were here to help me. This is my last night on Earth, I think to myself. And here I am, toiling over the stove like the woman does all day. "Ha." I laugh. Because my cooking seems funny suddenly, like I am

making fun of the woman and her stupid life. I keep stirring. When the berries are all melted and smashed and mixed with the sugar, I spoon them up into one of the old glass jars the woman keeps on the shelf for her own jams and jellies. I switch off the stove, put the chair back by the kitchen table, take my jar in one hand, and drag the dirty pot back to my room, where Waldemar is still sleeping. In all that ruckus, nothing can be heard in the house but the locomotive engine, the woman snoring her way far away from here. I hide the dirty pot in the closet again. The jar of poison jam in my hands is hot. I get back into bed and let the jar cool on my nightstand. I sleep a little, but I don't have any more dreams.

In the morning, I put the jar of poison jam in my satchel. I act like everything is normal.

"Good morning, Waldemar," I say. I try to pretend I am normal, but Waldemar knows that I am not.

"What is it? What's that smile for?"

"Oh, nothing, just that I'm going to kill Jarek Jaskolka today and go back to the other place. Sorry you can't come with me." I try to sound cheerful, like I don't know that Waldemar's heart is broken. He can see right through me. He has that ability, as my brother.

"I don't like this idea, Urszula. I think Jarek Jaskolka won't eat the jam. I think he'll hurt you instead. You'll get those marks like Mother, and turn into an angry woman just like her."

"But I'm angry already," I say. "Marks or no marks, it makes no difference. I need to get out of here. And if I go through the hole and arrive back to the other place, whatever that is, what will I care if my legs are full of worms?"

"Worms?"

"Worms."

My thoughts go suddenly to the cemetery, the rich black dirt that was dug up to make room for our father to be buried in. I wonder, once I go through the hole back to the place, will my body be left behind? Later, will Waldemar stand in the cemetery and watch the dirt get dug up for me to be buried in? Will worms want to eat my flesh? Will they chew my flesh and spit out mud, which the teacher says is good for planting things? I can't discuss this with Waldemar now. It would upset him too much to answer such questions. We get dressed for school and go to the kitchen for breakfast. The woman is slicing an onion, crying. I can't look at her. I am worried she can tell I've used the stove the night before. The air, I worry, still smells like poison jam.

"You look tired, Urszula," she says. "You look sick. Maybe you should stay home today. Maybe you're getting Waldemar's cough."

"Yes," Waldemar says. "You should stay home. Don't go anywhere. Just stay in bed and read a book. I'll bring your schoolwork home for you. Don't go doing anything crazy."

"You sound just like the woman," I say to Waldemar. "Call me Mother," the woman says.

The woman gives us our bread and yogurt, Waldemar's onion cooked in honey, and one for me, too.

"Thank you, Mother," Waldemar says.

I roll my eyes.

We eat in silence, Waldemar sniffing and clearing his throat. I keep my eyes on the worn wooden floor. "Good-bye, stupid floor," I say to myself. "Good-bye, ugly, stupid, old wood floor." But what do I care about that floor? A house can be full of life one day, then torn down into rubble the next. Tramways can be laid out. Millions of silly people can walk across a bit of Earth and never know what was once built on that place. We don't even know who's buried beneath our feet. So many people have come and gone, and where are they now? I think of the better place. "Jarek Jaskolka," I say to myself, but not out loud. I don't want Waldemar or the woman to hear me. I don't want any more trouble. I feel that I am ready to leave them both behind.

My satchel is heavy now, the jar of poison jam and butcher knife sagging down under my schoolbooks. Waldemar offers to carry my satchel for me.

"You look tired," he says. "Why not let me take that off your back?"

"Oh, you think you can solve things? You're just a little boy. You might have more muscles than me, but you're only a day older. You think you're smarter than me for that? You think you have all the answers, do you?"

Waldemar doesn't say anything. I am very excited with the thought that very soon, I'll be gone. I'm finally going

home, I think to myself. I try to hate Waldemar, but I can't. I try not to think about how much I really love him. It is hard to do.

We continue on our way up the road. I am breathing like a crazy person breathes. My heart is beating like a crazy person's heart beats. "Don't do anything crazy," Waldemar had warned me. What is crazy about what I'm doing? What does "crazy" even mean? There is one person everyone calls "crazy." She is an old lady who lives between the cans of garbage behind the market. She covers herself in cabbage leaves and fronds from carrot tops and old wax paper smeared with animal fat, and she talks to herself and smokes the dirty tips of cigarettes men toss to her where she lies during the day, basking in the sunshine, underneath the monument to the martyrs in the town square. But even she doesn't seem so crazy. She is probably just sad, like me, and from another place entirely. She seems to be making the most of her time on Earth, though, doing as she pleases. She doesn't work or have a crying baby to tend to. Nobody is going to get near her. Nobody is going to make her black and blue and bloody. She smells like so many toilets. But she does as she pleases. She is a grown woman. If I can't kill Jarek Jaskolka, I think to myself, I'll be like that crazy lady and cover myself in garbage.

"Are you mad?" Waldemar asks, kicking a little rock across the road.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I didn't sleep well. I'm all testy. My brain is like a bug bite I scratched bloody. Sorry," I say again.

Waldemar puts his arm around my shoulder, plucks some

berries from the bush as we walk past. He puts one up his nose and hands me the rest.

"Thanks," I tell him, but I don't swallow any berries. I don't want to be poisoned anymore. I want to be awake and ready to jump and dive down into the hole when it opens up for me. I don't want to be sleepy and miss my chance, in case the hole is only open for a second. And I want to be on my toes for when I kill Jarek Jaskolka. Waldemar puts another berry up his nose. I feel I have more courage than Waldemar now. He seems like the sad lost child the woman had said he'd looked like the day before. I let the poison berries in my hand drop to the ground. When we reach the square, I turn in the direction of the cemetery. Waldemar turns to the road that leads to school. We stop and look at each other.

"Are you really doing it?" Waldemar asks.

"It's worth a try," I shrug. I am just pretending to be easy-going. Inside, I am determined.

"I'll come with you," Waldemar says. "I mean that I'll walk to Jarek Jaskolka's house with you, just to see what happens. If he is really your person, and you kill him and the hole opens up, maybe I can jump through with you."

Somehow I don't believe what Waldemar is saying. I feel like he's just giving an excuse to follow me. I worry that he might sabotage my plans. But then I look into his eyes. No. He won't get in my way. He is my brother. He will never keep me from being happy.

So I allow Waldemar to follow me on the road to the cemetery. We are quiet as we walk. I don't ask what he's

thinking. I don't want to know. When we get to Jarek Jaskolka's house, we stand and watch the dark, curtained windows for a while. A meadowlark comes and taps its beak on the glass and hovers. Then another comes and flies right into the glass and breaks its neck. Its body falls to the ground. The first meadowlark flies away. This seems like a good omen.

The sun comes out from behind a cloud. The shadows of my body and Waldemar's body lie out in front of us like holes in the ground. I carefully lay my satchel down and put my arms around my brother.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I have to go in there alone. You know the hole will only be big enough for one. You know that, right?" I ask.

Waldemar nods. All our lives, we've understood each other. Even when we are angry, there is too much love to pretend to think that what we know to be true is only a made-up story. That's the cruel way of all those silly people: they tell you that what you believe is just some silly story. That's why I hate it here. Everybody thinks that I am crazy. I let go of Waldemar and pick up my satchel and start up the big broken concrete slabs to the door of Jarek Jaskolka's house.

"Will you come back for me?" my sweet brother asks. There are tears in his eyes. He looks so small and lost and sad from where I stand up high above him. I tell him I wish I could stay with him, but not here, not on Earth. Earth is the wrong place for me, always was and will be until the day I die.

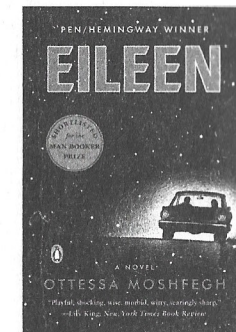
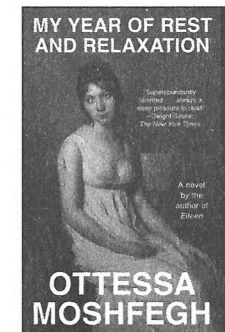
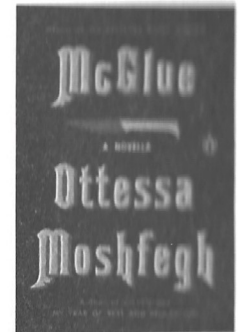
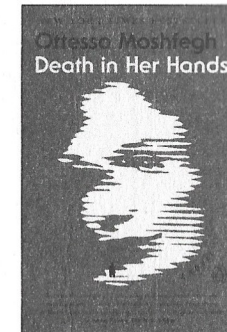
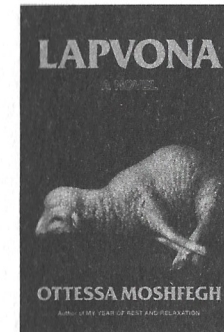
"Just try, if you can, to send me a letter from the place. And if there's some way you can come back, come get me."

"Okay, Waldemar. I'll try," I say, but I will never come back. Even if I can come back, I won't. I drop my satchel down into the dirt below. The books land hard like the sound of "good-bye." I hold my arms behind my back, and with the butcher knife in one hand, the jar of poison jam in the other, I kick on Jarek Jaskolka's door. Waldemar cries and hides against the wall of the house, holding the dead meadlowlark in his hands. He pinches his eyes closed.

"I'll miss you, Waldemar!" I whisper.

I wait for the bad man to let me in.

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