



This Is Paradise

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This Is Paradise

When the lights went out and the last of the men in the white uniforms had passed by, Adam and Eve got together in the small room and sat talking about old times.

'Remember,' Adam said, 'when we were children?'

'That's a long time ago,' she said in a whisper. 'I don't know if I can.'

'Look at us now,' he said and nodded toward the interior of the room.

It was like all the other rooms in the Eden Rest Home. Small beds with small tables beside. A Japanese miniature world created for the shrinking years that every human faced. Well, old people grew down not up, or so they'd all been told.

'Look at what?' Eve said.

'Look at me and you, we were there at the beginning, at least our namesakes were. Look at

you and me, and it's not so hard to take off the years and see what came before.'

She reached up to the bedside table and took down a small compact mirror.

In the mirror was an old woman, nothing left of the child, the girl that had come before.

'I don't see anything but me,' she said.

'Can't see what came before, no?'

'Can remember it, sort of, like an old film with actors I can't quite place names to.'

'And why?' he said.

She shrugged, her bony arms near piercing the flimsy cloth of her nightgown.

'That's just the way it is,' she said.

'That's what they tell us,' Adam said. 'Tell us we've got to slow down, biology demands a snail's pace. Everything's got to get smaller, run in slow motion. But I'll be damned if that's the way I'll end.'

'Damned if you do, damned if you—'

'Nobody has to be damned,' he said, 'not if they don't want to.' His voice rose.

She put a finger on his lips to stop the rising

He stared at the door, expecting any moment for the white-clothed brute they called Simon to rush in and put them to bed.

When there was no crash, and no forced bedtime, Adam hunkered down and beckoned Eve forward.

'I remember,' he whispered, 'when I could travel to any part of the universe I wanted, go to any time I felt like as easy as snapping a finger.'

She slapped him lightly on the cheek.

1. 'No you don't, you old fool.'

'Yes, I do,' he said, 'and so do you.'

'I do?

He tapped the side of his head. 'What's in here is as young as it's ever been. The wrapping may be torn, but the prize inside is just as good.'

'Your head?'

'My imagination,' he said. 'That's what took me through time and out to space when I was young. Don't you remember that? Don't you remember walking out into the world and it being whatever world you wanted it to be?'

She narrowed her twilight eyes and tried hard to see the past through that fog.

'You do,' he said, when she didn't answer.

'I don't know if I do, you know.'

'Yes, you do. Might take some time, but you're already halfway there.'

The fog of her eyes rolled upward. 'You sure about that, Adam?'

'As sure as I'm sitting here in this room when I've been told I shouldn't be,' he said. 'Don't you see? Look at us now, two naughty children of eighty and eighty one, hiding when the lights have gone out, laughing with a flashlight under the covers.'

She smiled, teeth out, flashing gums.

'You know, you're right. It's sort of like being a kid again.'

'That's what they say. You grow back to a state when you were first born. Get older, get younger. Only none of us actually use that.'

'Use it?'

He got up from the floor, his legs creaking like doors in a horror house. He opened a drawer in the side cabinet and fished around. Soon he had a pamphlet clamped between his fingers.

He lay it down before Eve.

'If we're going back in time, back to when we were born, I say we enjoy ourselves as kids again.'

On the pamphlet was the ocean touching a beautiful stretch of golden sand.

Eve picked it up.

'What's this?'

He smiled a similar gummy smile as hers.

'Wherever you want it to be,' he said. 'Could be Normandy when the tide washed out the memory of the dead, could be the surface of moon just before Armstrong got it all dirty with

his bootprints. The real Eden, perhaps. Whatever you want to call it.'

She pressed the pamphlet to her chest.

'You think?'

'I know,' he said.

'We could go to this place?'

'We must,' he said. 'It's our duty as the oldest kids on the planet.'

'When?'

'Tomorrow, when the lights go out. I have it all planned.'

'Can we really do this, Adam?'

He reached over to the pamphlet. He looked at it with adoration.

'What's stopping us?' he said.

'Simon?'

'Apart from him, nothing that's what. We might have a few years left until we say good-bye, but let's use all the time before then using this,' he tapped the side of his head. 'Let's make a deal, let's make a deal right now.'

'What kind of deal?' she said.

'That we'll be kids for as long as we live. That we'll live in paradise together. What do you say?'

She looked at the door.

She looked at him.

'I say yes,' she said.

Four layers deep in clothing they shuffled along the halls toward the car park.

Four or five times they pressed their fingers to their lips to beckon silences. But the two old kids couldn't make too much noise in slippers. They were like a fragile autumn wind blowing along the corridors.

At the end of the hall they saw him.

Simon sat behind his desk, his face deep in a newspaper, his ears plugged with a faraway music.

'Goliath,' Adam said.

'And we, David?' Eve asked.

'That we are.'

'And the stone that will bring him down?'

Adam smiled.

He reached in two layers deep and brought out the cosh.

'Stole this from the King of Siam,' he said.

'You did?'

Adam tapped the side of his head with the cosh. 'At least this is telling me I did.'

'Delightful,' she said, rubbing her hands together.

'You wait here, while I go slay the dragon,' he said.

'Dragon? I thought he was Goliath?'

'He's a dragon now,' he said and he held the cosh high in the air, 'and I the gallant knight ready for the slaying.'

'I suppose I'm the chaste maid ripe for the rescue?'

'Or maybe you're the fierce God of War looking down up on us?'

'Oooh, yes, I'll be the God of War, was that Mars?'

'It can be whatever you like. Stay here my pretty while I vanquish our foe,' he said, as he stepped out beyond the corridor.

She waved a hand at him.

'I'll protect you from the weather,' she said, 'it's the least any God could do.'

Adam crept in behind Simon.

But it hadn't been Simon for the last week. Adam had created a thousand worlds in that time and in each Simon became something new. Dragon, Goliath, The Sheriff of Nottingham, it did not matter. To be free of the prison, to get to paradise, a foe had to be vanquished.

'Stay your fire fierce creature, for I have come to plunge this dagger into the black sulphur of your beating heart,' Adam said.

But the only movement the dragon made was the bobbing of its head.

Adam saw not the bobbing, but the fierce beast rise up ready to burn him.

He swung.

Hit the head and the heart at the very same time.

The foe was vanquished.

'Come, Eve, we have paradise to find,' he called.

She came.

She nestled into his side as he started the van and pulled out of the car park into the night.

'Will this be the last journey?' she asked.

'The first,' he said.

She looked behind him, through the windows toward the fading white brick of Eden.

'Feels like the last, like we'll never come back.'

He nudged her back to his side.

'And would that be so bad?'

'Well...'

'Here we are, two children trapped by time, why not let ourselves be children forever?'

'I don't know if we have forever, Adam.'

'Of course we do,' he said, and took his hand off the wheel. 'Out there, see, the whole world, a thousand worlds. Clocks stopped, turn the hands back faster than you could wave your own hand if that's what you, *we* want.'

She nodded, but he could feel her belief waning.

'I thought you were a God? God's don't look back, Eve,' he said.

'Do they look forward?' she asked.

'What is this now? Why would you want to go back to that place? Nights we spent locked up like prisoners, days weren't much better. How many times did you see the sun through a window? How many cool breezes have you felt that weren't pushed out from the machines in the ceiling?'

She nestled deeper into the first of the four layers covering him.

'I suppose,' she said.

‘No suppose about it. We ran once, we dreamed, and then we get to an age where we leave our dreams behind, or at least that’s what we’re supposed to do. Tonight we’ll turn the pages back from the end of the book, we’ll read the beginning all over again.’

She hit the second layer of him with a hand, but he could feel it right through to the chalk of his bone.

‘You’re sure?’ she said.

‘Sure as Ahab on the deck, sure as the first man on the moon and all the knights of the round table. Why look at us here in our ship, sailing this midnight ocean. Calm weather ahead, paradise beckoning us. There’s nothing can stop us now.’

And as though inviting all the terrible twists of fate his assertion was answered by the flashing of lights from behind, the growl of an angry engine, soon imagined to be a monster.

Adam looked over his shoulder.

‘What is it?’ Eve asked.

There, hunched behind a wheel, rubbing at the sore spot on his head, was Simon.

‘Dragons,’ Adam said.

‘Can you outrun a dragon in a ship?’ she asked, and tried to turn and see the pursuer.

He pulled her head around.

‘Of course,’ he said, ‘in a spaceship.’

‘A spaceship?’

He hit the accelerator.

‘Flying past Andromeda, circling the milky way, surfing the rings of Saturn, that’s us,’ he said.

The lights flashed behind and before she could ask just who those lights belonged to, Adam said;

‘Meteor shower, be out of it soon.’

‘We will?’ she said.

‘There,’ he said, pointing out of the front window. ‘Paradise.’

She lifted her head up and looked out of the front window.

Beside the road was a sign, badly painted, rusted with age.

BEACH.

‘This is paradise?’ she asked.

‘It soon will be,’ he said as he twisted the wheel to the left and sent them toward the sign.

The van stalled a long way from the tide, and the tide was a long way from the beach, far away toward the unseen horizon.

But Adam could see none of this.

‘The moon,’ he shouted, ‘who would have guessed.’

He helped Alice down from their transport, and her hand in his, he walked the sand.

‘I’m cold,’ she said.

‘The moon is a cold place, but who would have guessed paradise would be here on the dark side?’

She rubbed at her arms, and shivered.

'I'm really cold, Adam, why don't we stop this now.'

He stopped, but there was no stopping the world created before his eyes.

'Stop?' he said.

She pointed back from where they'd come.

'He'll be here sooner rather than later, and then what?'

'A dragon can't breathe on the moon, we have nothing to fear,' he said.

She pulled her hand from his.

'We're not on the moon, you old fool.'

'Then Pluto, Mars, Jupiter, maybe this is the foot of Mount Kilimanjaro, or the Arctic Waste.'

'It's none of those things.' She gave the dirty beach, and the sharp steel grey waves an equally dirty look. 'This is just the beach, the terrible beach that nobody uses because it's so gritty and there's never any sun anyway.'

He reached for her hands.

She pulled them away.

But he wasn't about to give up now. Not now when he'd found the child still alive in him. He would not let her give in to the adult that lived under the skin, the bully that denied magic and wonder.

Finally he managed to pull her hands into his.

'Don't you see, Eve? Don't you see that if we believe that this is just some beach, some place untouched by the sun, then we may as well be dead. We may as well be back there in the little rooms wondering when we'll finally point our toes up.'

'I see, I understand, but it's cold out here, Adam. It's cold and they'll find us soon.'

'Were you cold as a child?'

'What is that supposed to mean?'

'Didn't you run and dive in the snow with no gloves, no hat, no coat? Didn't you jump in lakes and drown yourself only to run off the wet in the summer sun? Did you care about shivers, or rain back then?'

'But we're -'

‘No, we are,’ he said, ‘they just don’t want us to believe we are. You ever heard that saying about being as young as you feel? Well I’m going to be as young as I imagine. You too, if only for this one night. If only for a few minutes. What do you say?’

And she didn’t say anything, she closed her hands around his and squeezed.

‘That’s a yes?’ he said.

‘It’s a stop wasting time, let’s find this paradise of yours.’

‘Ours,’ he said.

‘Ours.’

‘Not cold?’ he asked.

She smiled. ‘Cold? Here on the surface of the Sun, how could anybody be cold?’

‘That’s it,’ he said, and turned toward the beach, which was a moon and the surface of the sun all at the same time.

Behind, the great dragon arrived, its engine breath growling. The lights touched them, high beamed white eyes of the terrible beast.

‘Run!’ he screamed with delight.

‘Where?’ she said.

He looked over the surface of this moon, and it was no longer the moon but the barren land beyond Eden, and there, the gate to Paradise.

‘There,’ he said, pointing to the upturned hull of a boat.

‘There,’ she repeated and they giggled their way across the sand towards this newly found Eden.

And there they stopped before the gates.

‘This is paradise?’ she asked.

‘Eden, itself.’

She was in full swing now, painting the dream with her words.

‘And will we be allowed back in? Weren’t we thrown out? I seem to remember snakes and something about apples?’

‘Exceptions will be made,’ he said, ‘for innocents such as us.’

‘You’re sure.’

He bowed, feeling the creak in his knees. He waved the way through the cracked wood to the paradise beyond.

‘After you, Madam,’ he said.

She curtsied. ‘Why, thank you.’

‘My pleasure.’

And as Eve ducked and entered the darkness, which was light beneath the upturned boat Eden, Adam glanced over his shoulder.

There on the beach, far away, was the dragon, its single flashlight eye combing the barren land for prey.

He joined her there in that paradise made from wish and will.

And together they huddled in the darkness, which was truly a light.

‘And now?’ she said.

‘Now...now we wait.’

‘For what?’

Adam pointed beyond Eden, to the barren lands and the approaching dragon.

‘What is it?’ Eve asked.

‘Can’t you see?’

She squinted out of the darkness.

‘I see...I see...what is it I see?’

Adam smiled.

Long ago there had been a child who’d run out on summer mornings and winter nights and he’d fought monsters and dragons.

And now that child had returned.

‘Whatever you want to see,’ Adam said as he wrapped her in his arms and waited for the light and the dragon to pass them by.

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