**HARRISON BERGERON by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.**

THE YEAR WAS 2081, and everybody was finally equal. They weren't only equal before God and the law. They were equal every which way. Nobody was smarter than anybody else. Nobody was better looking than anybody else. Nobody was stronger or quicker than anybody else. All this equality was due to the 211th, 212th, and 213th Amendments to the Constitution, and to the unceasing vigilance of agents of the United States Handicapper General.

Some things about living still weren't quite right, though. April for instance, still drove people crazy by not being springtime. And it was in that clammy month that the H-G men took George and Hazel Bergeron's fourteen-year-old son, Harrison, away.

It was tragic, all right, but George and Hazel couldn't think about it very hard. Hazel had a perfectly average intelligence, which meant she couldn't think about anything except in short bursts. And George, while his intelligence was way above normal, had a little mental handicap radio in his ear. He was required by law to wear it at all times. It was tuned to a government transmitter. Every twenty seconds or so, the transmitter would send out some sharp noise to keep people like George from taking unfair advantage of their brains.

George and Hazel were watching television. There were tears on Hazel's cheeks, but she'd forgotten for the moment what they were about.

On the television screen were ballerinas.

A buzzer sounded in George's head. His thoughts fled in panic, like bandits from a burglar alarm.

"That was a real pretty dance, that dance they just did," said Hazel.

"Huh" said George.

"That dance-it was nice," said Hazel.

"Yup," said George. He tried to think a little about the ballerinas. They weren't really very good-no better than anybody else would have been, anyway. They were burdened with sashweights and bags of birdshot, and their faces were masked, so that no one, seeing a free and graceful gesture or a pretty face, would feel like something the cat drug in. George was toying with the vague notion that maybe dancers shouldn't be handicapped. But he didn't get very far with it before another noise in his ear radio scattered his thoughts.

George winced. So did two out of the eight ballerinas.

Hazel saw him wince. Having no mental handicap herself, she had to ask George what the latest sound had been.

"Sounded like somebody hitting a milk bottle with a ball peen hammer," said George.

"I'd think it would be real interesting, hearing all the different sounds," said Hazel a little envious. "All the things they think up."

"Um," said George.

"Only, if I was Handicapper General, you know what I would do?" said Hazel. Hazel, as a matter of fact, bore a strong resemblance to the Handicapper General, a woman named Diana Moon Glampers. "If I was Diana Moon Glampers," said Hazel, "I'd have chimes on Sunday-just chimes. Kind of in honor of religion."

"I could think, if it was just chimes," said George.

"Well-maybe make 'em real loud," said Hazel. "I think I'd make a good Handicapper General."

"Good as anybody else," said George.

"Who knows better than I do what normal is?" said Hazel.

"Right," said George. He began to think glimmeringly about his abnormal son who was now in jail, about Harrison, but a twenty-one-gun salute in his head stopped that.

"Boy!" said Hazel, "that was a doozy, wasn't it?"

It was such a doozy that George was white and trembling, and tears stood on the rims of his red eyes. Two of of the eight ballerinas had collapsed to the studio floor, were holding their temples.

"All of a sudden you look so tired," said Hazel. "Why don't you stretch out on the sofa, so's you can rest your handicap bag on the pillows, honeybunch." She was referring to the forty-seven pounds of birdshot in a canvas bag, which was padlocked around George's neck. "Go on and rest the bag for a little while," she said. "I don't care if you're not equal to me for a while."

George weighed the bag with his hands. "I don't mind it," he said. "I don't notice it any more. It's just a part of me."

"You been so tired lately-kind of wore out," said Hazel. "If there was just some way we could make a little hole in the bottom of the bag, and just take out a few of them lead balls. Just a few."

"Two years in prison and two thousand dollars fine for every ball I took out," said George. "I don't call that a bargain."

"If you could just take a few out when you came home from work," said Hazel. "I mean-you don't compete with anybody around here. You just sit around."

"If I tried to get away with it," said George, "then other people'd get away with it-and pretty soon we'd be right back to the dark ages again, with everybody competing against everybody else. You wouldn't like that, would you?"

"I'd hate it," said Hazel.

"There you are," said George. The minute people start cheating on laws, what do you think happens to society?"

If Hazel hadn't been able to come up with an answer to this question, George couldn't have supplied one. A siren was going off in his head.

"Reckon it'd fall all apart," said Hazel.

"What would?" said George blankly.

"Society," said Hazel uncertainly. "Wasn't that what you just said?

"Who knows?" said George.

The television program was suddenly interrupted for a news bulletin. It wasn't clear at first as to what the bulletin was about, since the announcer, like all announcers, had a serious speech impediment. For about half a minute, and in a state of high excitement, the announcer tried to say, "Ladies and Gentlemen."

He finally gave up, handed the bulletin to a ballerina to read.

"That's all right-" Hazel said of the announcer, "he tried. That's the big thing. He tried to do the best he could with what God gave him. He should get a nice raise for trying so hard."

"Ladies and Gentlemen," said the ballerina, reading the bulletin. She must have been extraordinarily beautiful, because the mask she wore was hideous. And it was easy to see that she was the strongest and most graceful of all the dancers, for her handicap bags were as big as those worn by two-hundred pound men.

And she had to apologize at once for her voice, which was a very unfair voice for a woman to use. Her voice was a warm, luminous, timeless melody. "Excuse me-" she said, and she began again, making her voice absolutely uncompetitive.

"Harrison Bergeron, age fourteen," she said in a grackle squawk, "has just escaped from jail, where he was held on suspicion of plotting to overthrow the government. He is a genius and an athlete, is under-handicapped, and should be regarded as extremely dangerous."

A police photograph of Harrison Bergeron was flashed on the screen-upside down, then sideways, upside down again, then right side up. The picture showed the full length of Harrison against a background calibrated in feet and inches. He was exactly seven feet tall.

The rest of Harrison's appearance was Halloween and hardware. Nobody had ever born heavier handicaps. He had outgrown hindrances faster than the H-G men could think them up. Instead of a little ear radio for a mental handicap, he wore a tremendous pair of earphones, and spectacles with thick wavy lenses. The spectacles were intended to make him not only half blind, but to give him whanging headaches besides.

Scrap metal was hung all over him. Ordinarily, there was a certain symmetry, a military neatness to the handicaps issued to strong people, but Harrison looked like a walking junkyard. In the race of life, Harrison carried three hundred pounds.

And to offset his good looks, the H-G men required that he wear at all times a red rubber ball for a nose, keep his eyebrows shaved off, and cover his even white teeth with black caps at snaggle-tooth random.

"If you see this boy," said the ballerina, "do not - I repeat, do not - try to reason with him."

There was the shriek of a door being torn from its hinges.

Screams and barking cries of consternation came from the television set. The photograph of Harrison Bergeron on the screen jumped again and again, as though dancing to the tune of an earthquake.

George Bergeron correctly identified the earthquake, and well he might have - for many was the time his own home had danced to the same crashing tune. "My God-" said George, "that must be Harrison!"

The realization was blasted from his mind instantly by the sound of an automobile collision in his head.

When George could open his eyes again, the photograph of Harrison was gone. A living, breathing Harrison filled the screen.

Clanking, clownish, and huge, Harrison stood - in the center of the studio. The knob of the uprooted studio door was still in his hand. Ballerinas, technicians, musicians, and announcers cowered on their knees before him, expecting to die.

"I am the Emperor!" cried Harrison. "Do you hear? I am the Emperor! Everybody must do what I say at once!" He stamped his foot and the studio shook.

"Even as I stand here" he bellowed, "crippled, hobbled, sickened - I am a greater ruler than any man who ever lived! Now watch me become what I can become!"

Harrison tore the straps of his handicap harness like wet tissue paper, tore straps guaranteed to support five thousand pounds.

Harrison's scrap-iron handicaps crashed to the floor.

Harrison thrust his thumbs under the bar of the padlock that secured his head harness. The bar snapped like celery. Harrison smashed his headphones and spectacles against the wall.

He flung away his rubber-ball nose, revealed a man that would have awed Thor, the god of thunder.

"I shall now select my Empress!" he said, looking down on the cowering people. "Let the first woman who dares rise to her feet claim her mate and her throne!"

A moment passed, and then a ballerina arose, swaying like a willow.

Harrison plucked the mental handicap from her ear, snapped off her physical handicaps with marvelous delicacy. Last of all he removed her mask.

She was blindingly beautiful.

"Now-" said Harrison, taking her hand, "shall we show the people the meaning of the word dance? Music!" he commanded.

The musicians scrambled back into their chairs, and Harrison stripped them of their handicaps, too. "Play your best," he told them, "and I'll make you barons and dukes and earls."

The music began. It was normal at first-cheap, silly, false. But Harrison snatched two musicians from their chairs, waved them like batons as he sang the music as he wanted it played. He slammed them back into their chairs.

The music began again and was much improved.

Harrison and his Empress merely listened to the music for a while-listened gravely, as though synchronizing their heartbeats with it.

They shifted their weights to their toes.

Harrison placed his big hands on the girls tiny waist, letting her sense the weightlessness that would soon be hers.

And then, in an explosion of joy and grace, into the air they sprang!

Not only were the laws of the land abandoned, but the law of gravity and the laws of motion as well.

They reeled, whirled, swiveled, flounced, capered, gamboled, and spun.

They leaped like deer on the moon.

The studio ceiling was thirty feet high, but each leap brought the dancers nearer to it.

It became their obvious intention to kiss the ceiling. They kissed it.

And then, neutraling gravity with love and pure will, they remained suspended in air inches below the ceiling, and they kissed each other for a long, long time.

It was then that Diana Moon Glampers, the Handicapper General, came into the studio with a double-barreled ten-gauge shotgun. She fired twice, and the Emperor and the Empress were dead before they hit the floor.

Diana Moon Glampers loaded the gun again. She aimed it at the musicians and told them they had ten seconds to get their handicaps back on.

It was then that the Bergerons' television tube burned out.

Hazel turned to comment about the blackout to George. But George had gone out into the kitchen for a can of beer.

George came back in with the beer, paused while a handicap signal shook him up. And then he sat down again. "You been crying" he said to Hazel.

"Yup," she said.

"What about?" he said.

"I forget," she said. "Something real sad on television."

"What was it?" he said.

"It's all kind of mixed up in my mind," said Hazel.

"Forget sad things," said George.

"I always do," said Hazel.

"That's my girl," said George. He winced. There was the sound of a rivetting gun in his head.

"Gee - I could tell that one was a doozy," said Hazel.

"You can say that again," said George.

"Gee-" said Hazel, "I could tell that one was a doozy."

*"Harrison Bergeron" is copyrighted by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., 1961.*

**The Veldt by 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," be said, amused. "Nothing over there I can see but cleaned bone, and the vultures dropping for what's left."

 "Did you bear 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 startlingly 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 criedsteadily. "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 dam 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 scrubbath can? I cannot. And it isn't just me. It's you. You've been awfullynervous 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 bad 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 bad 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, be 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. OnlyRima 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 comer 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 bad 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 ball. "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 bad 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 bow 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 be 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 bad 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.

***Herland***,

by Charlotte Perkins Gilman

A prominent turn-of-the-century social critic and lecturer, Charlotte Perkins Gilman is perhaps best known for her short story "The Yellow Wallpaper," a chilling study of a woman's descent into insanity, and *Women and Economics,* a classic of feminist theory that analyzes the destructive effects of women's economic reliance on men.
In *Herland,* a vision of a feminist utopia, Gilman employs humor to engaging effect in a story about three male explorers who stumble upon an all-female society isolated somewhere in South America. Noting the advanced state of the civilization they've encountered, the visitors set out to find some males, assuming that since the country is so civilized, "there must be men." A delightful fantasy, the story enables Gilman to articulate her then-unconventional views of male-female roles and capabilities, motherhood, individuality, privacy, the sense of community, sexuality, and many other topics.

**"A Unique History"**

   It is no use for me to try to piece out this account with adventures. If the people who read it are not interested in these amazing women and their history, they will not be interested at all.

   As for us -- three young men to a whole landful of women -- what could we do? We did get away, as described, and were peacefully brought back again without, as Terry complained, even the satisfaction of hitting anybody.

   There were no adventures because there was nothing to fight. There were no wild beasts in the country and very few tame ones. Of these I might as well stop to describe the one common pet of the country. Cats, of course. But such cats!

   What do you suppose these Lady Burbanks had done with their cats? By the most prolonged and careful selection and exclusion they had developed a race of cats that did not sing! That's a fact. The most those poor dumb brutes could do was to make a kind of squeak when they were hungry or wanted the door open, and, of course, to purr, and make the various mother-noises to their kittens.

   Moreover, they had ceased to kill birds. They were rigorously bred to destroy mice and moles and all such enemies of the food supply; but the birds were numerous and safe.

   While we were discussing birds, Terry asked them if they used feathers for their hats, and they seemed amused at the idea.

He made a few sketches of our women's hats, with plumes and quills and those various tickling things that stick out so far; and they were eagerly interested, as at everything about our women.

   As for them, they said they only wore hats for shade when working in the sun; and those were big light straw hats, something like those used in China and Japan. In cold weather they wore caps or hoods.

   "But for decorative purposes -- don't you think they would be becoming?" pursued Terry, making as pretty a picture as he could of a lady with a plumed hat.

   They by no means agreed to that, asking quite simply if the men wore the same kind. We hastened to assure her that they did not -- drew for them our kind of headgear.

   "And do no men wear feathers in their hats?"

   "Only Indians," Jeff explained. "Savages, you know." And he sketched a war bonnet to show them.

   "And soldiers," I added, drawing a military hat with plumes.

   They never expressed horror or disapproval, nor indeed much surprise -- just a keen interest. And the notes they made! -- miles of them!

   But to return to our pussycats. We were a good deal impressed by this achievement in breeding, and when they questioned us -- I can tell you we were well pumped for information -- we told of what had been done for dogs and horses and cattle, but that there was no effort applied to cats, except for show purposes.

   I wish I could represent the kind, quiet, steady, ingenious way they questioned us. It was not just curiosity -- they weren't a bit more curious about us than we were about them, if as much. But they were bent on understanding our kind of civilization, and their lines of interrogation would gradually surround us and drive us in till we found ourselves up against some admissions we did not want to make.

   "Are all these breeds of dogs you have made useful?" they asked.

   "Oh -- useful! Why, the hunting dogs and watchdogs and sheepdogs are useful -- and sled dogs of course! -- and ratters, I suppose, but we don't keep dogs for their *usefulness*. The dog is 'the friend of man,' we say -- we love them."

   That they understood. "We love our cats that way. They surely are our friends, and helpers, too. You can see how intelligent and affectionate they are."

   It was a fact. I'd never seen such cats, except in a few rare instances. Big, handsome silky things, friendly with everyone and devotedly attached to their special owners.

   "You must have a heartbreaking time drowning kittens," we suggested. But they said, "Oh, no! You see we care for them as you do for your valuable cattle. The fathers are few compared to the mothers, just a few very fine ones in each town; they live quite happily in walled gardens and the houses of their friends. But they only have a mating season once a year."

   "Rather hard on Thomas, isn't it?" suggested Terry.

   "Oh, no -- truly! You see, it is many centuries that we have been breeding the kind of cats we wanted. They are healthy and happy and friendly, as you see. How do you manage with your dogs? Do you keep them in pairs, or segregate the fathers, or what?"

   Then we explained that -- well, that it wasn't a question of fathers exactly; that nobody wanted a -- a mother dog; that, well, that practically all our dogs were males -- there was only a very small percentage of females allowed to live.

   Then Zava, observing Terry with her grave sweet smile, quoted back at him: "Rather hard on Thomas, isn't it? Do they enjoy it -- living without mates? Are your dogs as uniformly healthy and sweet-tempered as our cats?"

   Jeff laughed, eyeing Terry mischievously. As a matter of fact we began to feel Jeff something of a traitor -- he so often flopped over and took their side of things; also his medical knowledge gave him a different point of view somehow.

   "I'm sorry to admit," he told them, "that the dog, with us, is the most diseased of any animal -- next to man. And as to temper -- there are always some dogs who bite people -- especially children."

   That was pure malice. You see, children were the -- the *raison d'etre* in this country. All our interlocutors sat up straight at once. They were still gentle, still restrained, but there was a note of deep amazement in their voices.

   "Do we understand that you keep an animal -- an unmated male animal -- that bites children? About how many are there of them, please?"

   "Thousands -- in a large city," said Jeff, "and nearly every family has one in the country."

   Terry broke in at this. "You must not imagine they are all dangerous -- it's not one in a hundred that ever bites anybody. Why, they are the best friends of the children -- a boy doesn't have half a chance that hasn't a dog to play with!"

   "And the girls?" asked Somel.

   "Oh -- girls -- why they like them too," he said, but his voice flatted a little. They always noticed little things like that, we found later.

   Little by little they wrung from us the fact that the friend of man, in the city, was a prisoner; was taken out for his meager exercise on a leash; was liable not only to many diseases but to the one destroying horror of rabies; and, in many cases, for the safety of the citizens, had to go muzzled. Jeff maliciously added vivid instances he had known or read of injury and death from mad dogs.

   They did not scold or fuss about it. Calm as judges, those women were. But they made notes; Moadine read them to us.

   "Please tell me if I have the facts correct," she said. "In your country -- and in others too?"

   "Yes," we admitted, "in most civilized countries."

   "In most civilized countries a kind of animal is kept which is no longer useful -- "

   "They are a protection," Terry insisted. "They bark if burglars try to get in."

   Then she made notes of "burglars" and went on: "because of the love which people bear to this animal."

   Zava interrupted here. "Is it the men or the women who love this animal so much?"

   "Both!" insisted Terry.

   "Equally?" she inquired.

   And Jeff said, "Nonsense, Terry -- you know men like dogs better than women do -- as a whole."

   "Because they love it so much -- especially men. This animal is kept shut up, or chained."

   "Why?" suddenly asked Somel. "We keep our father cats shut up because we do not want too much fathering; but they are not chained -- they have large grounds to run in."

   "A valuable dog would be stolen if he was let loose," I said. "We put collars on them, with the owner's name, in case they do stray. Besides, they get into fights -- a valuable dog might easily be killed by a bigger one."

   "I see," she said. "They fight when they meet -- is that common?" We admitted that it was.

   "They are kept shut up, or chained." She paused again, and asked, "Is not a dog fond of running? Are they not built for speed?" That we admitted, too, and Jeff, still malicious, enlightened them further.

   "I've always thought it was a pathetic sight, both ways -- to see a man or a woman taking a dog to walk -- at the end of a string."

   "Have you bred them to be as neat in their habits as cats are?" was the next question. And when Jeff told them of the effect of dogs on sidewalk merchandise and the streets generally, they found it hard to believe.

   You see, their country was as neat as a Dutch kitchen, and as to sanitation -- but I might as well start in now with as much as I can remember of the history of this amazing country before further description.



The Handmaid's Tale

by [**MARGARET ATWOOD**](http://www.npr.org/books/authors/138085370/margaret-eleanor-atwood)

**Book Summary**

Offred is a Handmaid in the Republic of Gilead, once the United States. She may leave the home of the Commander and his wife once a day to walk to food markets whose signs are now pictures instead of words because women are no longer allowed to read. She must lie on her back once a month and pray that the Commander makes her pregnant, because in an age of declining births, Offred and the other Handmaids are valued only if their ovaries are viable. Offred can remember the years before, when she lived and made love with her husband, Luke; when she played with and protected her daughter; when she had a job, money of her own, and access to knowledge. But all of that is gone now...

Excerpt from The Handmaid’s Tale by Margaret Atwood

Doubled, I walk the street. Though we are no longer in the Commanders' compound, there are large houses here also. In front of one of them a Guardian is mowing the lawn. The lawns are tidy, the facades are gracious, in good repair; they're like the beautiful pictures they used to print in the magazines about homes and gardens and interior decoration. There is the same absence of people, the same air of being asleep. The street is almost like a museum, or a street in a model town constructed to show the way people used to live. As in those pictures, those museums, those model towns, there are no children.

This is the heart of Gilead, where the war cannot intrude except on television. Where the edges are we aren't sure, they vary, according to the attacks and counterattacks; but this is the center, where nothing moves. The Republic of Gilead, said Aunt Lydia, knows no bounds. Gilead is within you.

Doctors lived here once, lawyers, university professors. There are no lawyers anymore, and the university is closed.

Luke and I used to walk together, sometimes, along these streets. We used to talk about buying a house like one of these, an old big house, fixing it up. We would have a garden, swings for the children. We would have children. Although we knew it wasn't too likely we could ever afford it, it was something to talk about, a game for Sundays. Such freedom now seems almost weightless.

We turn the corner onto a main street, where there's more traffic. Cars go by, black most of them, some gray and brown. There are other women with baskets, some in red, some in the dull green of the Marthas, some in the striped dresses, red and blue and green and cheap and skimpy, that mark the women of the poorer men. Econowives, they're called. These women are not divided into functions. They have to do everything; if they can. Sometimes there is a woman all in black, a widow. There used to be more of them, but they seem to be diminishing. You don't see the Commanders' Wives on the sidewalks. Only in cars.

The sidewalks here are cement. Like a child, I avoid stepping on the cracks. I'm remembering my feet on these sidewalks, in the time before, and what I used to wear on them. Sometimes it was shoes for running, with cushioned soles and breathing holes, and stars of fluorescent fabric that reflected light in the darkness. Though I never ran at night; and in the daytime, only beside well-frequented roads.

Women were not protected then.

I remember the rules, rules that were never spelled out but that every woman knew: Don't open your door to a stranger, even if he says he is the police. Make him slide his ID under the door. Don't stop on the road to help a motorist pretending to be in trouble. Keep the locks on and keep going. If anyone whistles, don't turn to look. Don't go into a laundromat, by yourself, at night.

I think about laundromats. What I wore to them: shorts, jeans, jogging pants. What I put into them: my own clothes, my own soap, my own money, money I had earned myself. I think about having such control.

Now we walk along the same street, in red pairs, and no man shouts obscenities at us, speaks to us, touches us. No one whistles.

There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don’t underrate it.

In front of us, to the right, is the store where we order dresses. Sonic people call them habits, a good word for them. Habits are hard to break. The store has a huge wooden sign outside it, in the shape of a golden lily; Lilies of the Field, it's called. You can see the place, under the lily, where the lettering was painted out, when they decided that even the names of shops were too much temptation for us. Now places are known by their signs alone.

Lilies used to be a movie theater, before. Students went there a lot; every spring they had a Humphrey Bogart festival, with Lauren Bacall or Katharine Hepburn, women on their own, making up their minds. They wore blouses with buttons down the front that suggested the possibilities of the word undone. These women could be undone; or not. They seemed to be able to choose. We seemed to be able to choose, then. We were a society dying, said Aunt Lydia, of too much choice.

I don't know when they stopped having the festival. I must have been grown up. So I didn't notice.

We don't go into Lilies, but across the road and along a side street. Our first stop is at a store with another wooden sign: three eggs, a bee, a cow. Milk and Honey. There's a line, and we wait our turn, two by two. I see they have oranges today. Ever since Central America was lost to the Libertheos, oranges have been hard to get: sometimes they are there, sometimes not. The war interferes with the oranges from California, and even Florida isn't dependable, when there are roadblocks or when the train tracks have been blown up. I look at the oranges, longing for one. But I haven't brought any coupons for oranges. I'll go back and tell Rita about them, I think. She'll be pleased. It will be something, a small achievement, to have made oranges happen.

Those who've reached the counter hand their tokens across it, to the two men in Guardian uniforms who stand on the other side. Nobody talks much, though there is a rustling,and the women's heads move furtively from side to side: here, shopping, is where you might see someone you know, someone you've known in the time before, or at the Red Center. Just to catch sight of a face like that is an encouragement. If I could see Moira, just see her, know she still exists. It's hard to imagine now, having a friend

But Ofglen, beside me, isn't looking, Maybe she doesn’t know anyone anymore. Maybe they have all vanished, the women she knew. Or maybe she doesn't want to be seen. She stands in silence head down.

As we wait in our double line, the door opens and two more women come in, both in the red dresses and white wings of the Handmaids. One of them is vastly pregnant; her belly, under her loose garment, swells triumphantly. There is a shifting in the room, a murmur, an escape of breath; despite ourselves we turn our heads, blatantly, to see better; our fingers itch to touch her. She's a magic presence to us, an object of envy and desire, we covet her. She's a flag on a hilltop, showing us what can still be done: we too can be saved.

The women in the room are whispering, almost talking, so great is their excitement.

"Who is it?" I hear behind me.

"Ofwayne. No. Ofwarren."

"Showoff," a voice hisses, and this is true. A woman that pregnant doesn't have to go out, doesn't have to go shopping. The daily walk is no longer prescribed, to keep her abdominal muscles in working order. She needs only the floor exercises, the breathing drill. She could stay at her house. And it's dangerous for her to be out, there must be a Guardian standing outside the door, waiting for her. Now that she's the carrier of life, she is closer to death, and needs special security. Jealousy could get her, it's happened before. All children are wanted now, but not by everyone.

But the walk may be a whim of hers, and they humor whims, when something has gone this far and there's been no miscarriage. Or perhaps she's one of those, Pile it on, I can take it, a martyr. I catch a glimpse of her face, as she raises it to look around. The voice behind me was right. She's come here to display herself. She's glowing, rosy, she's enjoying every minute of this.

"Quiet," says one of the Guardians behind the counter, and we hush like schoolgirls.

Ofglen and I have reached the counter. We hand over our tokens, and one Guardian enters the numbers on them into the Compubite while the other gives us our purchases, the milk, the

eggs. We put them into our baskets and go out again, past the pregnant woman and her partner, who beside her looks spindly, shrunken; as we all do. The pregnant woman's belly is like a huge fruit. Humungous, a word of my childhood. Her hands rest on it as if to defend it, or as if they're gathering something from it, warmth and strength.

As I pass she looks full at me, into my eyes, and I know who she; is. She was at the Red Center with me, one of Aunt Lydia's pets. I never liked her. Her name, in the time before, was Janine.

Janine looks at me, then, and around the corners of her mouth there is the trace of a smirk. She glances down to where my own belly lies flat under my red robe, and the wings cover her face. I can see only a little of her forehead, and the pinkish tip of her nose.

Next we go into All Flesh, which is marked by a large wooden pork chop hanging from two chains. There isn't so much of a line here: meat is expensive, and even the Commanders don't have it every day. Ofglen gets steak, though, and that's the second time this week. I'll tell that to the Marthas: it's the kind of thing they enjoy hearing about. They are very interested in how other households are run; such bits of petty gossip give them an opportunity for pride or discontent.

I take the chicken, wrapped in butcher's paper and trussed with string. Not many things are plastic, anymore. I remember those endless white plastic shopping bags, from the supermarket; I hated to waste them and would stuff them in under the sink, until the day would come when there would be too many and I would open the cupboard door and they would bulge out, sliding over the floor. Luke used to complain about it. Periodically he would take all the bags and throw them out.

She could get one of those over her head, he'd say. You know how kids like to play. She never would, I'd say. She's too old. (Or too smart, or too lucky.) But I would feel a chill of fear, and then guilt for having been so careless. It was true, I took too much for granted; I trusted fate, back then. I'll keep them in a higher cupboard, I'd say. Don't keep them at all, he'd say. We never use them for anything. Garbage bags, I'd say. He'd say…

Not here and now. Not where people are looking. I turn, see my silhouette in the plate glass window. We have come outside, then, we are on the street.

A group of people is coming towards us. They're tourists, from Japan it looks like, a trade delegation perhaps, on a tour of the historic landmarks or out for local color. They're diminutive and neatly turned out; each has his or her camera, his or her smile. They look around, bright-eyed, cocking their heads to one side like robins, their very cheerfulness aggressive, and I can't help staring. It's been a long time since I've seen skirts that short on women. The skirts reach just below the knee and the legs come out from beneath them, nearly naked in their thin stockings, blatant, the high-heeled shoes with their straps attached to the feet like delicate instruments of torture. The women teeter on their spiked feet as if on stilts, but off balance; their backs arch at the waist, thrusting the buttocks out. Their heads are uncovered and their hair too is exposed, in all its darkness and sexuality. They wear lipstick, red, outlining the damp cavities of their mouths, like scrawls on a washroom wall, of the time before.

I stop walking. Ofglen stops beside me and I know that she too cannot take her eyes off these women. We are fascinated, but also repelled. They seem undressed. It has taken so little time to change our minds, about things like this.

Then I think: I used to dress like that. That was freedom.

Westernized, they used to call it.

The Japanese tourists come towards us, twittering, and we turn our heads away too late: our faces have been seen.

There's an interpreter, in the standard blue suit and red-patterned tie, with the winged-eye tie pin. He's the one who steps forward, out of the group, in front of us, blocking our way. The tourists bunch behind him; one of them raises a camera.

"Excuse me," he says to both of us, politely enough. "They're asking if they can take your picture."

I look down at the sidewalk, shake my head for no. What they must see is the white wings only, a scrap of face, my chin and part of my mouth. Not the eyes. I know better than to look the interpreter in the face. Most of the interpreters are Eyes, or so it's said.

I also know better than to say yes. Modesty is invisibility, said Aunt Lydia. Never forget it. To be seen-to be seen-is to be-her voice trembled-penetrated. What you must be, girls, is impenetrable. She called us girls.

Beside me, Ofglen is also silent. She's tucked her red-gloved hands up into her sleeves, to hide them.

The interpreter turns back to the group, chatters at them in staccato. I know what he'll be saying, I know the line. He'll be telling them that the women here have different customs, that to stare at them through the lens of a camera is, for them, an experience of violation.

I'm looking down, at the sidewalk, mesmerized by the women's feet. One of them is wearing open-toed sandals, the toenails painted pink. I remember the smell of nail polish, the way it wrinkled if you put the second coat on too soon, the satiny brushing of sheer pantyhose against the skin, the way the toes felt, pushed towards the opening in the shoe by the whole weight of the body. The woman with painted toes shifts from one foot to the other. I can feel her shoes, on my own feet. The smell of nail polish has made me hungry.

"Excuse me," says the interpreter again, to catch our attention. I nod, to show I've heard him.

"He asks, are you happy," says the interpreter. I can imagine it, their curiosity: Are they happy? How can they be happy? I can feel their bright black eyes on us, the way they lean a little forward to catch our answers, the women especially, but the men too: we are secret, forbidden, we excite them.

Ofglen says nothing. There is a silence. But sometimes it's as dangerous not to speak.

"Yes, we are very happy," I murmur. I have to say something. What else can I say?

**Politics and the English Language *excerpt***

**By George Orwell**

Most people who bother with the matter at all would admit that the English language is in a bad way, but it is generally assumed that we cannot by conscious action do anything about it. Our civilization is decadent and our language — so the argument runs — must inevitably share in the general collapse. It follows that any struggle against the abuse of language is a sentimental archaism, like preferring candles to electric light or hansom cabs to aeroplanes. Underneath this lies the half-conscious belief that language is a natural growth and not an instrument which we shape for our own purposes.

Now, it is clear that the decline of a language must ultimately have political and economic causes: it is not due simply to the bad influence of this or that individual writer. But an effect can become a cause, reinforcing the original cause and producing the same effect in an intensified form, and so on indefinitely. A man may take to drink because he feels himself to be a failure, and then fail all the more completely because he drinks. It is rather the same thing that is happening to the English language. It becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts. The point is that the process is reversible. Modern English, especially written English, is full of bad habits which spread by imitation and which can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary trouble. If one gets rid of these habits one can think more clearly, and to think clearly is a necessary first step toward political regeneration: so that the fight against bad English is not frivolous and is not the exclusive concern of professional writers. I will come back to this presently, and I hope that by that time the meaning of what I have said here will have become clearer. …

In our time it is broadly true that political writing is bad writing. Where it is not true, it will generally be found that the writer is some kind of rebel, expressing his private opinions and not a ‘party line’. Orthodoxy, of whatever colour, seems to demand a lifeless, imitative style. The political dialects to be found in pamphlets, leading articles, manifestos, White papers and the speeches of undersecretaries do, of course, vary from party to party, but they are all alike in that one almost never finds in them a fresh, vivid, homemade turn of speech.

When one watches some tired hack on the platform mechanically repeating the familiar phrases — *bestial, atrocities, iron heel, bloodstained* *tyranny, free peoples of the world, stand shoulder to shoulder* — one often has a curious feeling that one is not watching a live human being but some kind of dummy: a feeling which suddenly becomes stronger at moments when the light catches the speaker's spectacles and turns them into blank discs which seem to have no eyes behind them. And this is not altogether fanciful. A speaker who uses that kind of phraseology has gone some distance toward turning himself into a machine. The appropriate noises are coming out of his larynx, but his brain is not involved, as it would be if he were choosing his words for himself. If the speech he is making is one that he is accustomed to make over and over again, he may be almost unconscious of what he is saying, as one is when one utters the responses in church. And this reduced state of consciousness, if not indispensable, is at any rate favourable to political conformity.

In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defence of the indefensible. Things like the continuance of British rule in India, the Russian purges and deportations, the dropping of the atom bombs on Japan, can indeed be defended, but only by arguments which are too brutal for most people to face, and which do not square with the professed aims of the political parties. Thus political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness. Defenceless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called *pacification*. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry: this is called *transfer of population* or *rectification of frontiers*. People are imprisoned for years without trial, or shot in the back of the neck or sent to die of scurvy in Arctic lumber camps: this is called *elimination of unreliable elements*. Such phraseology is needed if one wants to name things without calling up mental pictures of them. Consider for instance some comfortable English professor defending Russian totalitarianism. He cannot say outright, ‘I believe in killing off your opponents when you can get good results by doing so’. Probably, therefore, he will say something like this:

‘While freely conceding that the Soviet regime exhibits certain features which the humanitarian may be inclined to deplore, we must, I think, agree that a certain curtailment of the right to political opposition is an unavoidable concomitant of transitional periods, and that the rigors which the Russian people have been called upon to undergo have been amply justified in the sphere of concrete achievement.’

The inflated style itself is a kind of euphemism. A mass of Latin words falls upon the facts like soft snow, blurring the outline and covering up all the details. The great enemy of clear language is insincerity. When there is a gap between one's real and one's declared aims, one turns as it were instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms, like a cuttlefish spurting out ink. In our age there is no such thing as ‘keeping out of politics’. All issues are political issues, and politics itself is a mass of lies, evasions, folly, hatred, and schizophrenia. When the general atmosphere is bad, language must suffer. I should expect to find — this is a guess which I have not sufficient knowledge to verify — that the German, Russian and Italian languages have all deteriorated in the last ten or fifteen years, as a result of dictatorship.