

How to Organise a Read Aloud Party

A Read Aloud party is a fantastic alternative to a book group and is perfect for friends or a group of people new to each other. You might want to organise one in your library or promote it to members of your bookgroup. Perhaps to meet new people, or maybe to invite friends you always wanted to introduce to each other, without ever finding quite the right occasion to do so.

All you need is:

- * A number of chairs equal to the number of participants.
- * A number of copies of the book equal to half the number of participants.
- * Optionally, a number of blindfolds (scarves will do) equal to half the number of participants.

It is quite simple, and it works like this:

1. The Book. Order in a few copies of *To Read Aloud* to your library. You only need half of your attendees to have one.

2. The Chairs. Take out as many chairs as are the guests, and put the chairs in groups of two, side by side, with their back facing each other. If you have an odd number of guests, simply put a third chair in one of the groups, in the same way.

3. The Beginning. Ask your friends to sit in the chairs, and introduce them to the party. Explain that you are going to have three rounds of Reading Aloud, and that everybody will change partner at the end of each round.

4. The Reader and The *Readee*. In each group one person will read, and one person will be read to. The person who is being read to - the *readee* - will select a chapter; then the reader will select a writing from within that chapter. The reader will not reveal to the *readee* the name of the author of the piece until after she has read it.

4. Round one: Warming Up. A Read Aloud Party is structured in three rounds, starting with the Warming Up. In this first round you can only select writings up to 6 minutes long: this helps the party-goers to get into the mood, and to reassure those who might be skeptical towards a new experience. When the reading is done, each couple can briefly discuss the piece, or meditate on it in a shared silence, as they see fit.

5. The Swap. Everybody stands up and changes partner. This is a fundamental rule of a Read Aloud Party, because it allows people to mingle and chat. It is not necessary for readers and *readees* to switch roles: some people love to read, others love to be read to, and others yet like to change.

6. Round two: The Core. When everybody is sitting with a new partner, the Core round begins. It works exactly like round one, but this time there is no limitation as to the length of the pieces selected. Longer pieces are an excellent way to really feel the full power of reading aloud.

7. Once More, The Swap. Everybody changes partner again.

8. Round three: The Mystery. In the last and final round, the person who is being read to has the option to wear a blindfold. It is only an option: some might feel ill-at-ease. However, without the weight of sight, it is easier to get gently lost in the words read to us, and the experience of being a *readee* becomes even more intense.

9. Conclusion: The Conversation. The three rounds, with the introduction and a short close, take less than an hour in total. Of course,

if you and your friends feel so inclined, nothing is stopping you from continuing with more rounds. But after the third-round people will feel comfortable and amused: they will want to stand up, share some drinks, and chat. Discuss how the event made you feel; did you prefer being the reader or readee? Did you like the pieces chosen for you? Would you read more by that author? How did you feel before and after the readings, has this experience changed your mood?

Additional Materials

If you would like to bring the spirit of a Read Aloud party to life, you may find these videos from Francesco Dimitri, author of *To Read Aloud*, helpful.

Video One: Introduction.

<https://youtu.be/FJvURkiKd2Q>

This introduces the concept of the Read Aloud movement and the history of reading aloud, and provides the perfect pre-event introduction.

Video Two: The Read Aloud event.

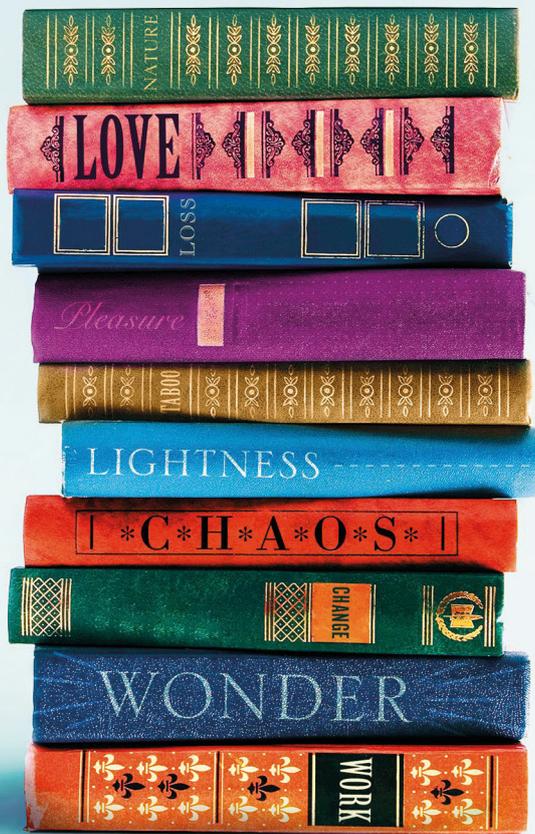
https://youtu.be/_FLaqvCAG4g

Here Francesco introduces the To Read Aloud event, and the structure of the evening ahead in a similar manner to the instructions above.

Extract Pack: Limited Extracts for events.

This pack contains two extracts from each chapter – one short-length for round one, and one longer extract for round two.

To Read Aloud



A TOOLKIT FOR
LITERARY WELLBEING

FRANCESCO DIMITRI

Chapters

Love

A Respectable Woman, Kate Chopin,

14 minutes

Letter to Hippolyte de Guibert, Julie de L'Espinasse

3 minutes

Loss

The Sweeper of Dreams, Neil Gaiman

3 minutes

Scheherazade's Typewriter, Joe Hill

10 minutes

Change

The Oak in my Garden, Francesco Dimitri

12 minutes

Dust Tracks on the Road, Zora Neale Hurston

4 minutes

Pleasure

Stone Junction, Jim Dodge

5 minutes

Manuel, Anaïs Nin

10 minutes

Work

Professions for Women, Virginia Woolf

14 minutes

Cranford, Elizabeth Gaskell

5 minutes

Nature

Adonis: Myth

8 minutes

Common Ground, Rob Cowen

12 minutes

Chaos

The Dead Moon, Rosalind Kerven

10 minutes

Black Swan Green, David Mitchell

6 minutes

Lightness

Speech Made on his Seventieth Birthday, Mark Twain

6 minutes

On Running After One's Hat, G.K. Chesterton

10 minutes

Wonder

The Messenger, Algernon Blackwood

10 minutes

Going to Hell. Instructions and Advice, Kelly Link

5 minutes

LOVE

'A Respectable Woman'

KATE CHOPIN



⌚ 14 minutes

This is a short story – written in the 1890s by an author who lived in America's Deep South – about doing the right thing, whatever the right thing might be.



Mrs. Baroda was a little provoked to learn that her husband expected his friend, Gouvernail, up to spend a week or two on the plantation.

They had entertained a good deal during the winter; much of the time had also been passed in New Orleans in various forms of mild dissipation. She was looking forward to a period of unbroken rest, now, and undisturbed tête-a-tête with her husband, when he informed her that Gouvernail was coming up to stay a week or two.

This was a man she had heard much of but never seen. He had been her husband's college friend; was now a journalist, and in no sense a society man or 'a man about town,' which were, perhaps, some of the reasons she had never met him. But she had unconsciously formed an image of him in her mind. She pictured him tall, slim,

cynical; with eye-glasses, and his hands in his pockets; and she did not like him.

Gouvernail was slim enough, but he wasn't very tall nor very cynical; neither did he wear eye-glasses nor carry his hands in his pockets. And she rather liked him when he first presented himself.

But why she liked him she could not explain satisfactorily to herself when she partly attempted to do so. She could discover in him none of those brilliant and promising traits which Gaston, her husband, had often assured her that he possessed. On the contrary, he sat rather mute and receptive before her chatty eagerness to make him feel at home and in face of Gaston's frank and wordy hospitality. His manner was as courteous toward her as the most exacting woman could require; but he made no direct appeal to her approval or even esteem.

Once settled at the plantation he seemed to like to sit upon the wide portico in the shade of one of the big Corinthian pillars, smoking his cigar lazily and listening attentively to Gaston's experience as a sugar planter.

'This is what I call living,' he would utter with deep satisfaction, as the air that swept across the sugar field caressed him with its warm and scented velvety touch. It pleased him also to get on familiar terms with the big dogs that came about him, rubbing themselves sociably against his legs. He did not care to fish, and displayed no eagerness to go out and kill *grosbecs* when Gaston proposed doing so.

Gouvernail's personality puzzled Mrs. Baroda, but she liked him. Indeed, he was a lovable, inoffensive fellow.

After a few days, when she could understand him no better than at first, she gave over being puzzled and remained piqued. In this mood she left her husband and her guest, for the most part, alone together. Then finding that Gouvernail took no manner of exception to her action, she imposed her society upon him, accompanying him in his idle strolls to the mill and walks along the batture. She persistently sought to penetrate the reserve in which he had unconsciously enveloped himself.

‘When is he going – your friend?’ she one day asked her husband. ‘For my part, he tires me frightfully.’

‘Not for a week yet, dear. I can’t understand; he gives you no trouble.’

‘No. I should like him better if he did; if he were more like others, and I had to plan somewhat for his comfort and enjoyment.’

Gaston took his wife’s pretty face between his hands and looked tenderly and laughingly into her troubled eyes. They were making a bit of toilet sociably together in Mrs. Baroda’s dressing-room.

‘You are full of surprises, ma belle,’ he said to her. ‘Even I can never count upon how you are going to act under given conditions.’ He kissed her and turned to fasten his cravat before the mirror.

‘Here you are,’ he went on, ‘taking poor Gouvernail seriously and making a commotion over him, the last thing he would desire or expect.’

‘Commotion!’ she hotly resented. ‘Nonsense! How can you say such a thing? Commotion, indeed! But, you know, you said he was clever.’

‘So he is. But the poor fellow is run down by overwork now. That’s why I asked him here to take a rest.’

‘You used to say he was a man of ideas,’ she retorted, unconciliated. ‘I expected him to be interesting, at least. I’m going to the city in the morning to have my spring gowns fitted. Let me know when Mr Gouvernail is gone; I shall be at my Aunt Octavie’s.’

That night she went and sat alone upon a bench that stood beneath a live oak tree at the edge of the gravel walk.

She had never known her thoughts or her intentions to be so confused. She could gather nothing from them but the feeling of a distinct necessity to quit her home in the morning.

Mrs. Baroda heard footsteps crunching the gravel; but could discern in the darkness only the approaching red point of a lighted cigar. She knew it was Gouvernail, for her husband did not smoke. She hoped to remain unnoticed, but her white gown revealed her to him. He threw away his cigar and seated himself upon the bench beside her; without a suspicion that she might object to his presence.

‘Your husband told me to bring this to you, Mrs. Baroda,’ he said, handing her a filmy, white scarf with which she sometimes enveloped her head and shoulders. She accepted the scarf from him with a murmur of thanks, and let it lie in her lap.

He made some commonplace observation upon the baneful effect of the night air at that season. Then as his gaze reached out into the darkness, he murmured, half to himself:

‘Night of south winds – night of the large few stars!
Still nodding night—’

She made no reply to this apostrophe to the night, which indeed, was not addressed to her.

Gouvernail was in no sense a diffident man, for he was not a self-conscious one. His periods of reserve were not constitutional, but the result of moods. Sitting there beside Mrs. Baroda, his silence melted for the time.

He talked freely and intimately in a low, hesitating drawl that was not unpleasant to hear. He talked of the old college days when he and Gaston had been a good deal to each other; of the days of keen and blind ambitions and large intentions. Now there was left with him, at least, a philosophic acquiescence to the existing order – only a desire to be permitted to exist, with now and then a little whiff of genuine life, such as he was breathing now.

Her mind only vaguely grasped what he was saying. Her physical being was for the moment predominant. She was not thinking of his words, only drinking in the tones of his voice. She wanted to reach out her hand in the darkness and touch him with the sensitive tips of her fingers upon the face or the lips. She wanted to draw close to him and whisper against his cheek – she did not care what – as she might have done if she had not been a respectable woman.

The stronger the impulse grew to bring herself near him, the further, in fact, did she draw away from him. As soon as she could do so without an appearance of too great rudeness, she rose and left him there alone.

Before she reached the house, Gouvernail had lighted a fresh cigar and ended his apostrophe to the night.

Mrs. Baroda was greatly tempted that night to tell her husband – who was also her friend – of this folly that had seized her. But she did not yield to the temptation. Beside being a respectable woman she was a very sensible one; and she knew there are some battles in life which a human being must fight alone.

When Gaston arose in the morning, his wife had already departed. She had taken an early morning train to the city. She did not return till Gouvernail was gone from under her roof.

There was some talk of having him back during the summer that followed. That is, Gaston greatly desired it; but this desire yielded to his wife’s strenuous opposition. However, before the year ended, she proposed, wholly from herself, to have Gouvernail visit them again. Her husband was surprised and delighted with the suggestion coming from her.

‘I am glad, chère amie, to know that you have finally overcome your dislike for him; truly he did not deserve it.’

‘Oh,’ she told him, laughingly, after pressing a long, tender kiss upon his lips, ‘I have overcome everything! you will see. This time I shall be very nice to him.’



adventure • instinct • irony • married life • rules
self-knowledge • temptation

letter to Hippolyte de Guibert

JULIE DE L'ESPINASSE



⌚ 3 minutes

Julie de l'Espinasse hosted a salon in eighteenth-century Paris. A well-educated, witty, intelligent woman, she wrote a large number of letters.

In this one she leads us – with passion and eloquence – to three words that are very simple, and yet very difficult to say.



Ah, my dear friend, you hurt me, and a great curse for you and for me is the feeling which animates me. You were right in saying that you did not need to be loved as I know how to love; no, that is not your measure; you are so perfectly lovable, that you must be or become the first object of desire of all these charming ladies, who stick upon their heads all they had in it, and who are so lovable that they love themselves by preference above everything. You will give pleasure, you will satisfy the vanity of nearly all women. By what fatality have you held me to life, and you make me die of anxiety and of pain? My friend, I do not

complain; but it distresses me that you pay no heed to my repose; this thought chills and tears my heart alternately. How can one have an instant's tranquillity with a man whose head is as defective as his coach, who counts for nothing the dangers, who never foresees anything, who is incapable of taking care, of exactitude, to whom it never happens to do what he has projected; in a word, a man who everything attracts, and whom nothing can stay nor give stability... Good night. My door has not been opened once today, but my heart palpitated. There were moments when I feared to hear your voice, and then I was disconsolate that it was not your voice. So many contradictions, so many contrary movements are true, and can be explained in three words: *I love you.*



anxiety • desire

LOSS

The Sweeper of Dreams

NEIL GAIMAN



⌚ 3 minutes

There is a balance we must keep, between our nocturnal dream world and the sun-drenched reality. Neil Gaiman warns us against the danger of losing it.



After all the dreaming is over, after you wake, and leave the world of madness and glory for the mundane day-lit daily grind, through the wreckage of your abandoned fancies walks the sweeper of dreams.

Who knows what he was when he was alive? Or if, for that matter, he ever was alive. He certainly will not answer your questions. The sweeper talks little, in his gruff grey voice, and when he does speak it is mostly about the weather and the prospects, victories and defeats of certain sport teams. He despises everyone who is not him.

Just as you wake he comes to you, and he sweeps up kingdoms and castles, and angels and owls, mountains and oceans. He sweeps up the lust and the love and the

lovers, the sages who are not butterflies, the flowers of meat, the running of the deer and the sinking of the *Lusitania*. He sweeps up everything you left behind in your dreams, the life you wore, the eyes through which you gazed, the examination paper you were never able to find. One by one he sweeps them away: the sharp-toothed woman who sank her teeth into your face; the nuns in the woods; the dead arm that broke through the tepid water of the bath: the scarlet worms that crawled in your chest when you opened your shirt.

He will sweep it up – everything you left behind when you woke. And then he will burn it, to leave the stage fresh for your dreams tomorrow.

Treat him well, if you see him. Be polite with him. Ask him no questions. Applaud his teams' victories, commiserate with him over their losses, agree with him about the weather. Give him the respect he feels he is due.

For there are people he no longer visits, the sweeper of dreams, with his hand-rolled cigarette and his dragon tattoo.

You've seen them. They have mouths that twitch, and eyes that stare, and they babble and they mewl and they whimper. Some of them walk the cities in ragged clothes, their belonging under their arms. Others in their number are locked in the dark, in places where they can no longer harm themselves or others. They are not mad, or rather, the loss of their sanity is the lesser of their problems. It is worse than madness. They will tell you, if you let them: they are the ones who live, each day, in the wreckage of their dreams.

And if the sweeper of dreams leaves you, he will never
come back.



magic • resilience

'Scheherazade's Typewriter'

JOE HILL



⌚ 10 minutes

When we lose someone we love, how long does
it take to make sense of the loss?



Elena's father had gone into the basement every night, after work, for as far back as she could remember, and did not come up until he had written three pages on the humming IBM electric typewriter he had bought in college, when he still believed he would someday be a famous novelist. He had been dead for three days before his daughter heard the typewriter in the basement, at the usual time: a burst of rapid bang-bang-banging, followed by a waiting silence, filled out only by the idiot hum of the machine.

Elena descended the steps, into darkness, her legs weak. The drone of his IBM filled the musty-smelling dark, so the gloom itself seemed to vibrate with electrical current, as before a thunderstorm. She reached the lamp beside her father's typewriter, and flipped it on just as the

Selectrix burst into another bang-bang flurry of noise. She screamed, and then screamed again when she saw the keys moving on their own, the chrome type ball lunging against the bare black platen.

That first time Elena saw the typewriter working on its own, she thought she might faint from the shock of it. Her mother almost did faint, when Elena showed her, the very next night. When the typewriter jumped to life and began to write, Elena's mother threw her hands up and shrieked and her legs wobbled under her, and Elena had to grab her by the arm to keep her from going down.

But in a few days they got used to it, and then it was exciting. Her mother had the idea to roll a sheet of paper in, just before the typewriter switched itself on at 8 p.m. Elena's mother wanted to see what it was writing, if it was a message for them from beyond. *My grave is cold. I love you and I miss you.*

But it was only another of his short stories. It didn't even start at the beginning. The page began midway, right in the middle of a sentence.

It was Elena's mother who thought to call the local news. A producer from channel five came to see the typewriter. The producer stayed until the machine turned itself on and wrote a few sentences, then she got up and briskly climbed the stairs. Elena's mother hurried after her, full of anxious questions.

'Remote control,' the producer said, her tone curt. She looked back over her shoulder with an expression of distaste. 'When did you bury your husband, ma'am? A week ago? What's wrong with you?'

None of the other television stations were interested. The man at the newspaper said it didn't sound like their kind of thing. Even some of their relatives suspected it was a prank in bad taste. Elena's mother went to bed and stayed there for several weeks, flattened by a terrible migraine, despondent and confused. And in the basement, every night, the typewriter worked on, flinging onto paper in noisy chattering bursts.

The dead man's daughter attended to the Selectrix. She learned just when to roll a fresh sheet of paper in, so that each night the machine produced three new pages of story, just as it had when her father was alive. In fact, the machine seemed to wait for her, humming in a jovial sort of way, until it had a fresh sheet to stain with ink.

Long after no one else wanted to think about the typewriter any more, Elena continued to go into the basement at night, to listen to the radio, and fold laundry, and roll a new sheet of paper into the IBM when it was necessary. It was a simple enough way to pass the time, mindless and sweet, rather like visiting her father's grave each day to leave fresh flowers.

Also, she had come to like reading the stories when they were finished. Stories about masks and baseball and fathers and their children... and ghosts. Some of them were ghost stories. She liked those the best. Wasn't that the first thing you learned in every fiction course everywhere? Write what you know? The ghost in the machine wrote about the dead with great authority.

After a while, the ribbons for the typewriter were only available by special order. Then even IBM stopped making

them. The type ball wore down. She replaced it, but then the carriage started sticking. One night, it looked up, wouldn't move forward, and oily smoke began to trickle from under the iron hood of the machine. The typewriter hammered letter after letter, one right on top of the other, with a kind of mad fury, until Elena managed to scramble over and shut it off.

She brought it to a man who repaired old typewriters and other appliances. He returned it in perfect operating condition, but it never wrote on its own again. In the three weeks it was at the shop, it lost the habit.

As a little girl, Elena had asked her father why he went into the basement each night to make things up, and he had said it was because he couldn't sleep until he had written. Writing things warmed his imagination up for the work of creating an evening full of sweet dreams. Now she was unsettled by the idea that his death might be a restless, sleepless thing. But there was no help for it.

She was by then in her twenties and when her mother died – an unhappy old woman, estranged not just from her family but the entire world – she decided to move out, which meant selling the house and all that was in it. She had hardly started to sort the clutter in the basement, when she found herself sitting on the steps, rereading the stories her father had written after he died. In his life, he had given up the practice of submitting his work to publishers, had wearied of rejection. But his postmortem work seemed to the girl to be much – *livelier* – than his earlier work, and his stories of hauntings and the unnatural seemed especially arresting. Over the next few weeks,

she collected his best into a single book, and began to send it to publishers. Most said there was no market in collections by writers of no reputation, but in time she heard from an editor at a small press who said he liked it, that her father had a fine feel for the supernatural.

'Didn't he?' she said.

Now this is the story as I first heard it myself from a friend in the publishing business. He was maddeningly ignorant of the all-important details, so I can't tell you where the book was finally published or when or, really, anything more regarding this curious collection. I wish I knew more. As a man who is fascinated with the occult, I would like to obtain a copy.

Unfortunately, the title and author of the unlikely book are not common knowledge.



comfort • creativity • magic • time

CHANGE

'The Oak in my Garden'

FRANCESCO DIMITRI



🕒 12 minutes

There is an oak, and there is a young family,
and there are things which might or
might not come to pass...



I cannot carve my sweetheart's initials on the oak in my garden, nor can I climb it on a summer afternoon. I cannot hang a hammock on it and I cannot sit in its shade, with ice-cold lemonade and a book. This oak is far too small for that.

The oak in my garden barely reaches halfway up my shin: young as she is, she can't travel all the way up to my knee. In winter I need to be careful not to stamp on her, not to mistake her for a dead branch sticking out from the earth. When the oak looks up at me, she must feel I am a giant: I could kill her on a whim. And yet I can see that she is not afraid of me. Being an oak, she is brave, almost foolhardy.

This oak was born after my wife and I moved into this

house. We didn't buy her in a shop. She came out of an acorn – buried, I would guess, by one of the grey squirrels that hang around our neighbourhood. Why did the squirrel not come back for it? I couldn't say, but food is plentiful around here, and I imagine that squirrels can afford to be careless with their acorns. But was it carelessness, I wonder? Or perhaps the squirrel met its end soon after burying the acorn? A car, a cat, a misjudged jump, or simply old age

Be that as it may, the squirrel made the oak. In fifty years from now it will be surprising to think of that – but only if the oak survives that long, if she has the chance to transform herself into a towering marvel with deep roots, thick bark, and a green crown of foliage around her head. For today the oak is still comfortably squirrel-sized. A mere acorn is fatter than her trunk; and from that trunk only a forlorn offshoot pokes out, hesitantly, as if not sure that poking out was the clever thing to do.

The oak grows – slowly, as oaks do – in the strip of bare earth between the lawn and the fence. She is fragile, easy to kill, and she keeps out of the way of us giants. I look at her as little as I can, for I know, as she knows, that her future is set to be grim.

The first time I noticed her, I was having breakfast on the patio with my wife and a friend. It was late Spring, and the oak had proudly managed not one, but two green leaves. Our friend noticed them, and nodded at them, and said that we should root it up. You can't keep an oak in a city garden.

He was right, of course. This oak is like a tiger cub:

manageable until she stays small, but ultimately not cut for what tame amusements we have to offer. Though she is harmless now, cute in a defenceless sort of way, she has the sap of the Queen of the Woods running through her trunk, beating to the rhythm of her roots. Her spirit is strong, stronger than mine, and left to herself, she will grow – although slowly, as oaks do.

This garden is no place for towering marvels. Year after year, this oak will become bigger, and new offshoots will band together with the one I see now, a small group of friends at first, and then an army. The oak will become taller than me, and mightier. Her roots will reach deep underground, and will declare war on the foundations of my house, and though the roots might lose a few battles, roots always win in the end. The oak will become too proud for the fence she is growing so close to, and she will want to bring it down. She will become too big for the herbaceous border, and she will fatten herself on the precious space she now shares with violets and roses and daffodils. She will eat up the fence, she will eat up the border, she will eat up the lawn, and the very basis of the little dwelling my wife and I call our home, reclaiming her rightful heritage, her crown of leaves. So yes, I should get rid of her.

But not just yet.

This oak was small last year, and she is small this year, and she will be small for years to come. My wife and I are not planning to live in this house for ever: by the time the oak has grown to be tall and mighty, we shall be long gone. And maybe we will leave her here, and hope the new

owners of the garden (not of the oak, because nobody can ever own an oak) will let her enjoy a few more springs. Or maybe we will take her with us when we depart, a living memory of this particular moment of our life, and when we have the bigger garden we sometimes talk of, there might be room for her there too. Wouldn't it be cruel to kill her now, small as she is?

The oak is aware that the cards are stacked against her. If she is permitted to grow, a time will come when she is too big and too powerful and has to be cut down. And even if we took her with us to a new home, the journey would be dangerous, and it is far from certain that she would survive it. So for all the potential for royalty that runs fierce in her sap, it is unlikely that the oak will ever live to realise it. Her hopes will be crushed, and she will end her days uprooted and forgotten in a metropolitan dump.

She knows that, and she doesn't care. She is much too wise. She looks at me, defiant, and if only I knew how to talk to spirits, I would hear her saying, this is what I am, a thing of the wild, able to grow in the deep of the woods as much as in your neat garden, built by squirrels and the secret workings of the earth, and you might kill me, but you can't bend me: you have no real power over me. You could destroy me right now, without breaking sweat, but even so, I am much stronger than you, because you are afraid of the future and I am not, and my kind will reign over this world long after your kind is past and gone.

And I know she is right, and I let her be, for now. One day I will have to consider the problem she poses; I will

have to ponder the balance between the call of the wild
and the need to protect fences, foundations, and herba-
ceous borders.

One day – but not just yet.



anxiety • hope • married life • potential

Dust Tracks on a Road

ZORA NEALE HURSTON



 4 minutes

Zora Neale Hurston was an African-American writer whose work fell into obscurity after her death in 1960. Here, in her autobiography, she remembers when, as a little girl, she started having visions about her future, and all that it would entail.



I do not know when the visions began. Certainly I was not more than seven years old, but I remember the first coming very distinctly. My brother, Joel, and I had made a hen take an egg back and been caught as we turned the hen loose. We knew we were in for it and decided to scatter until things cooled off a bit. He hid out in the barn, but I combined secretion with pleasure, and ran clear off the place. Mr Linsay's house was vacant at the time. He was a neighbour who was off working somewhere. I had not thought of stopping there when I set out, but I saw a big raisin lying on the porch and stopped to eat it. There was some cool shade on the porch, so I sat down, and

soon I was asleep in a strange way. Like clearcut stereopticon slides, I saw twelve scenes flash before me, each one held until I had seen it well in every detail, and then be replaced by another. There was no continuity as in an average dream. Just disconnected scene after scene with blank spaces in between. I knew that they were all true, a preview of things to come, and my soul writhed in agony and shrunk away. But I knew that there was no shrinking. These things had to be. I did not wake up when the last one flickered and vanished. I merely sat up and saw the Methodist Church, the line of moss-draped oaks, and our strawberry patch stretching off to the left.

So when I left the porch, I left a great deal behind me. I was weighed down with a power I did not want. I had knowledge before its time. I knew my fate. I knew that I would be an orphan and homeless. I knew that while I was still helpless, that the comforting circle of my family would be broken, and that I would have to wander cold and friendless until I had served my time. I would stand beside a dark pool of water and see a huge fish move slowly away at a time when I would be somehow in the depth of despair. I would hurry to catch a train, with doubts and fears driving me and seek solace in a place and fail to find it when I arrived, then cross many tracks to board the train again. I knew that a house, a shot-gun built house that needed a new coat of white paint, held torture for me, but I must go. I saw deep love betrayed, but I must feel and know it. There was no turning back. And last of all, I would come to a big house. Two women waited there for me. I could not see their faces, but I knew one to be

young and one to be old. One of them was arranging some queer-shaped flowers such as I had never seen. When I had come to these women, then I would be at the end of my pilgrimage, but not the end of my life. Then I would know peace and love and what goes with those things, and not before.



anxiety · hope · resilience · time · potential

PLEASURE

Stone Junction

JIM DODGE



⌚ 5 minutes

Have you ever danced naked in the rain?
Believe me, it's a fantastic experience. And
this is what happens when you try.



The most memorable lesson for both Daniel and Annalee occurred on a warm May afternoon. All three of them were cleaning the pantry, item number nine on Annalee's list of spring chores, when the sky suddenly darkened with a mass of clouds. Within minutes rain began falling. Johnny Seven Moons went to the open door, inhaled deeply, and started stripping off his clothes. Daniel and Annalee exchanged anxious glances.

'You going swimming?' Daniel joked.

'No,' Seven Moons said, hopping out of his pants and tossing them aside. 'I'm going for a walk in the warm spring rain. Join me if you like. Walking naked in warm spring rain is one of the highest spiritual pleasures available to human creatures.'

Annalee was already wiggling out of her jeans, but Daniel had a question: ‘It is a higher pleasure than blowing up dams?’

Seven Moons shut his eyes and almost immediately opened them. ‘That’s a tough one, but I think they’d have to be the same. You see, if I didn’t blow up dams and keep rivers where they’re supposed to be, in not very long there would be no warm spring rain to walk naked in.’

It was splendid. Hands joined, Daniel in the middle, they walked naked across the flat and up to the oak-studded knoll where, deliriously drenched, they sang ‘Old Man River’ to the clearing sky. The sun burned through minutes later. By the time they walked back to the house through the wraiths of mist lifting from the soaked grass, everything but their feet and hair had dried.

Annalee and Daniel recalled that walk with Seven Moons often, but they never talked about what had really moved them. Annalee had been so overwhelmed by the rain on her flesh that she was afraid she was going to come, to collapse in wet grass. She felt constrained. It was difficult to shift her attention away from her body and back to them, even though they brought their own sweet joy.

Daniel remembered a moment as they’d started up the knoll, when he looked at his mother, so beautiful, her skin shining with rain, and then he’d looked at Seven Moons, strong and wise and brave, feeling their large hands in his and the rain splattering on his shoulders, feeling for just a moment that the world was perfect.

They both remembered yet never mentioned what Johnny Seven Moons had said when they reached the

top of the knoll. He’d tilted his head back and groaned out, ‘Oh, blowing up dams is a *tremendous* responsibility, an *important* responsibility, a *grave* responsibility...’ And then he’d laughed like a loon, the sound echoing distantly across the flat and then lost in the hush of rain. He squeezed Daniel’s hand and grinned at Annalee. ‘It’s only at moments like this that I’m glad we’re all going to die.’



adventure • companionship • instinct • meaning

'Manuel'

ANAÏS NIN



🕒 10 minutes

We all have our own particular ways of pursuing pleasure. Some are stranger than others...



Manuel had developed a peculiar form of enjoyment that caused his family to repudiate him, and he lived like a Bohemian in Montparnasse. When not obsessed with his erotic exigencies, he was an astrologer, an extraordinary cook, a great conversationalist and an excellent café companion. But not one of these occupations could divert his mind from his obsession. Sooner or later Manuel had to open his pants and exhibit his rather formidable member.

The more people there were, the better. The more refined the party, the better. If he got among the painters and models, he waited until everybody was a little drunk and gay, and then he undressed himself completely. His ascetic face, dreamy and poetic eyes and lean monklike body were so much in dissonance with his behavior that it startled everyone. If they turned away from him, he had

no pleasure. If they looked at him for any time at all, then he would fall into a trance, his face would become ecstatic, and soon he would be rolling on the floor in a crisis of orgasm.

Women tended to run away from him. He had to beg them to stay and resorted to all kinds of tricks. He would pose as a model and look for work in women's studios. But the condition he got into as he stood there under the eyes of the female students made the men throw him out into the street.

If he were invited to a party, he would first try to get one of the women alone somewhere in an empty room or on a balcony. Then he would take down his pants. If the woman was interested he would fall into ecstasy. If not, he would run after her, with his erection, and come back to the party and stand there, hoping to create curiosity. He was not a beautiful sight but a highly incongruous one. Since the penis did not seem to belong to the austere religious face and body, it acquired a greater prominence – as it were, an apartness.

He finally found the wife of a poor literary agent who was dying of starvation and overwork, with whom he reached the following arrangement. He would come in the morning and do all her housework for her, wash her dishes, sweep her studio, run errands, on condition that when all this was over he could exhibit himself. In this case he demanded all her attention. He wanted her to watch him unfasten his belt, unbutton his pants, pull them down. He wore no underwear. He would take out his penis and shake it like a person weighing a thing of

value. She had to stand near him and watch every gesture. She had to look at his penis as she would look at food she liked.

This woman developed the art of satisfying him completely. She would become absorbed in the penis, saying, 'It's a beautiful penis you have there, the biggest I have seen in Montparnasse. It's so smooth and hard. It's beautiful.'

As she said these words, Manuel continued to shake his penis like a pot of gold under her eyes, and saliva came to his mouth. He admired it himself. As they both bent over it to admire it his pleasure would become so keen that he would close his eyes and be taken with a bodily trembling from head to foot, still holding his penis and shaking it under her face. Then the trembling would turn into undulation and he would fall on the floor and roll himself into a ball as he came, sometimes all over his own face.

Often he stood at dark corners of the streets, under an overcoat, and if a woman passed he opened his coat and shook his penis at her. But this was dangerous and the police punished such behavior rather severely. Oftener still he liked to get into an empty compartment of a train, unbutton two of the buttons, and sit back as if he were drunk or asleep, his penis showing a little through the opening. People would come in at other stations. If he were in luck it might be a woman who would sit across from him and stare at him. As he looked drunk, usually no one tried to wake him. Sometimes one of the men would rouse him angrily and tell him to button himself. Women did not protest. If a woman came in with little school-girls, then he was in paradise. He would have an erection,

and finally the situation would become so intolerable, the woman and her little girls would leave the compartment.

One day Manuel found his twin in this form of enjoyment. He had taken his seat in a compartment, alone, and was pretending to fall asleep when a woman came in and sat opposite him. She was a rather mature prostitute as he could see from the heavily painted eyes, the thickly powdered face, the rings under her eyes, the over-curved hair, the worn-down shoes, the coquettish dress and hat.

Through half-closed eyes he observed her. She took a glance at his partly opened pants and then looked again. She too sat back and appeared to fall asleep, with her legs wide apart. When the train started she raised her skirt completely. She was underneath. She stretched open her legs and exposed herself while looking at Manuel's penis, which was hardening and showing through the pants and which finally protruded completely. They sat in front of each other, staring. Manuel was afraid the woman would move and try to get hold of his penis, which was not what he wanted at all. But no, she was addicted to the same passive pleasures. She knew he was looking at her sex, under the very black and bushy hair, and finally they opened their eyes and smiled at each other. He was entering his ecstatic state, but he had time to notice that she was in a state of pleasure herself. He could see the shining moisture appearing at the mouth of the sex. She moved almost imperceptibly to and fro, as if rocking herself to sleep. His body began to tremble with voluptuous pleasure. She then masturbated in front of him, smiling all the time.

Manuel married this woman, who never tried to possess him in the way of other women.



irony • instinct • luck

WORK

'Professions for Women'

VIRGINIA WOOLF



 14 minutes

The novelist Virginia Woolf had to fight an enemy who still haunts our offices and workplaces. She calls it the 'Angel in the House'.



You have only got to figure to yourselves a girl in a bedroom with a pen in her hand. She had only to move that pen from left to right – from ten o'clock to one. Then it occurred to her to do what is simple and cheap enough after all – to slip a few of those pages into an envelope, fix a penny stamp in the corner, and drop the envelope into the red box at the corner. It was thus that I became a journalist; and my effort was rewarded on the first day of the following month – a very glorious day it was for me – by a letter from an editor containing a cheque for one pound ten shillings and sixpence. [...]

Instead of spending that sum upon bread and butter, rent, shoes and stockings, or butcher's bills, I went out and bought a cat – a beautiful cat, a Persian cat, which very

soon involved me in bitter disputes with my neighbours.

What could be easier than to write articles and to buy Persian cats with the profits? But wait a moment. Articles have to be about something. Mine, I seem to remember, was about a novel by a famous man. And while I was writing this review, I discovered that if I were going to review books I should need to do battle with a certain phantom. And the phantom was a woman, and when I came to know her better I called her after the heroine of a famous poem, *The Angel in the House*. It was she who used to come between me and my paper when I was writing reviews. It was she who bothered me and wasted my time and so tormented me that at last I killed her. You who come of a younger and happier generation may not have heard of her – you may not know what I mean by the *Angel in the House*. I will describe her as shortly as I can. She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it – in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all – I need not say it – she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty – her blushes, her great grace. In those days [...] every house had its *Angel*. And when I came to write I encountered her with the very first words. The shadow of her wings fell on my page; I heard the rustling of her skirts in the room. Directly, that is to say, I took my pen in my hand to review that novel

by a famous man, she slipped behind me and whispered: ‘My dear, you are a young woman. You are writing about a book that has been written by a man. Be sympathetic; be tender; flatter; deceive; use all the arts and wiles of our sex. Never let anybody guess that you have a mind of your own. Above all, be pure.’ And she made as if to guide my pen. [...]

I turned upon her and caught her by the throat. I did my best to kill her. My excuse, if I were to be had up in a court of law, would be that I acted in self-defence. Had I not killed her she would have killed me. She would have plucked the heart out of my writing. For, as I found, directly I put pen to paper, you cannot review even a novel without having a mind of your own, without expressing what you think to be the truth about human relations, morality, sex. And all these questions, according to the *Angel of the House*, cannot be dealt with freely and openly by women; they must charm, they must conciliate, they must – to put it bluntly – tell lies if they are to succeed. Thus, whenever I felt the shadow of her wing or the radiance of her halo upon my page, I took up the inkpot and flung it at her. She died hard. Her fictitious nature was of great assistance to her. It is far harder to kill a phantom than a reality. She was always creeping back when I thought I had despatched her. Though I flatter myself that I killed her in the end, the struggle was severe; it took much time that had better have been spent upon learning Greek grammar; or in roaming the world in search of adventures. But it was a real experience; it was an experience that was bound to befall all women writers at that time. Killing the *Angel in*

the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer.

But to continue my story. The Angel was dead; what then remained? You may say that what remained was a simple and common object – a young woman in a bedroom with an inkpot. In other words, now that she had rid herself of falsehood, that young woman had only to be herself. Ah, but what is ‘herself’? I mean, what is a woman? I assure you, I do not know. I do not believe that you know. I do not believe that anybody can know until she has expressed herself in all the arts and professions open to human skill. That indeed is one of the reasons why I have come here out of respect for you, who are in process of showing us by your experiments what a woman is, who are in process Of providing us, by your failures and successes, with that extremely important piece of information.

But to continue the story of my professional experiences. I made one pound ten and six by my first review; and I bought a Persian cat with the proceeds. Then I grew ambitious. A Persian cat is all very well, I said; but a Persian cat is not enough. I must have a motor car. And it was thus that I became a novelist – for it is a very strange thing that people will give you a motor car if you will tell them a story. It is a still stranger thing that there is nothing so delightful in the world as telling stories. It is far pleasanter than writing reviews of famous novels. And yet [...] I must tell you about a very strange experience that befell me as a novelist. [...] I want you to imagine me writing a novel in a state of trance. I want you to figure to yourselves a girl sitting with a pen in her hand, which for minutes,

and indeed for hours, she never dips into the inkpot. The image that comes to my mind when I think of this girl is the image of a fisherman lying sunk in dreams on the verge of a deep lake with a rod held out over the water. She was letting her imagination sweep unchecked round every rock and cranny of the world that lies submerged in the depths of our unconscious being. Now came the experience, the experience that I believe to be far commoner with women writers than with men. The line raced through the girl’s fingers. Her imagination had rushed away. It had sought the pools, the depths, the dark places where the largest fish slumber. And then there was a smash. There was an explosion. There was foam and confusion. The imagination had dashed itself against something hard. The girl was roused from her dream. She was indeed in a state of the most acute and difficult distress. To speak without figure she had thought of something, something about the body, about the passions which it was unfitting for her as a woman to say. Men, her reason told her, would be shocked. The consciousness of – what men will say of a woman who speaks the truth about her passions had roused her from her artist’s state of unconsciousness. She could write no more. The trance was over. Her imagination could work no longer. [...]

These then were two very genuine experiences of my own. These were two of the adventures of my professional life. The first – killing the Angel in the House – I think I solved. She died. But the second, telling the truth about my own experiences as a body, I do not think I solved. I doubt that any woman has solved it yet. The obstacles

against her are still immensely powerful – and yet they are very difficult to define. [...] Outwardly, what obstacles are there for a woman rather than for a man? Inwardly, I think, the case is very different; she has still many ghosts to fight, many prejudices to overcome. Indeed it will be a long time still, I think, before a woman can sit down to write a book without finding a phantom to be slain, a rock to be dashed against.

[...]

Even when the path is nominally open – when there is nothing to prevent a woman from being a doctor, a lawyer, a civil servant – there are many phantoms and obstacles, as I believe, looming in her way. [...]

You have won rooms of your own in the house hitherto exclusively owned by men. You are able, though not without great labour and effort, to pay the rent. [...] But this freedom is only a beginning – the room is your own, but it is still bare. It has to be furnished; it has to be decorated; it has to be shared. How are you going to furnish it, how are you going to decorate it? With whom are you going to share it, and upon what terms? These, I think are questions of the utmost importance and interest. [...] Willingly would I stay and discuss those questions and answers – but not tonight. My time is up; and I must cease.



anxiety • learning • resilience

Cranford

ELIZABETH GASKELL



🕒 5 minutes

You might be worried about your finances, maybe even slightly ashamed that you don't earn more money. Just so you know: everybody else feels the same.



I imagine that a few of the gentlefolks of Cranford were poor, and had some difficulty in making both ends meet; but they were like the Spartans, and concealed their smart under a smiling face. We none of us spoke of money, because that subject savoured of commerce and trade, and though some might be poor, we were all aristocratic. The Cranfordians had that kindly *esprit de corps* which made them overlook all deficiencies in success when some among them tried to conceal their poverty. When Mrs Forrester, for instance, gave a party in her baby-house of a dwelling, and the little maiden disturbed the ladies on the sofa by a request that she might get the tea-tray out from underneath, everyone took this novel proceeding as the most natural thing in the world, and talked on about

household forms and ceremonies as if we all believed that our hostess had a regular servants' hall, second table, with housekeeper and steward, instead of the one little charity-school maiden, whose short ruddy arms could never have been strong enough to carry the tray upstairs, if she had not been assisted in private by her mistress, who now sat in state, pretending not to know what cakes were sent up, though she knew, and we knew, and she knew that we knew, and we knew that she knew that we knew, she had been busy all the morning making tea-bread and sponge-cakes.

There were one or two consequences arising from this general but unacknowledged poverty, and this very much acknowledged gentility, which were not amiss, and which might be introduced into many circles of society to their great improvement. For instance, the inhabitants of Cranford kept early hours, and clattered home in their pattens, under the guidance of a lantern-bearer, about nine o'clock at night; and the whole town was abed and asleep by half-past ten. Moreover, it was considered 'vulgar' (a tremendous word in Cranford) to give anything expensive, in the way of eatable or drinkable, at the evening entertainments. Wafer bread-and-butter and sponge-biscuits were all that the Honourable Mrs Jamieson gave; and she was sister-in-law to the late Earl of Glenmire, although she did practise such 'elegant economy.'

'Elegant economy!' How naturally one falls back into the phraseology of Cranford! There, economy was always 'elegant,' and money-spending always 'vulgar and ostentatious' [...]. I never shall forget the dismay felt when a certain

Captain Brown came to live at Cranford, and openly spoke about his being poor – not in a whisper to an intimate friend, the doors and windows being previously closed, but in the public street! in a loud military voice! alleging his poverty as a reason for not taking a particular house. The ladies of Cranford were already rather moaning over the invasion of their territories by a man and a gentleman. He was a half-pay captain, and had obtained some situation on a neighbouring railroad, which had been vehemently petitioned against by the little town; and if, in addition to his masculine gender, and his connection with the obnoxious railroad, he was so brazen as to talk of being poor – why, then, indeed, he must be sent to Coventry. Death was as true and as common as poverty; yet people never spoke about that, loud out in the streets. It was a word not to be mentioned to ears polite. We had tacitly agreed to ignore that any with whom we associated on terms of visiting equality could ever be prevented by poverty from doing anything that they wished. If we walked to or from a party, it was because the night was so fine, or the air so refreshing, not because sedan-chairs were expensive. If we wore prints, instead of summer silks, it was because we preferred a washing material; and so on, till we blinded ourselves to the vulgar fact that we were, all of us, people of very moderate means. Of course, then, we did not know what to make of a man who could speak of poverty as if it was not a disgrace.


anxiety • irony

NATURE

Adonis



⌚ 8 minutes

We don't need to *go into nature*, we don't need to reconnect with nature. We only need to remember that we *are* nature: our bones, our flesh, our eyes are all made of the same substance as trees and lawns and ponds: we are not *in* the world, but part of it.

Take the story of Adonis, for example...



He was born from a tree, in unhappy circumstances. His mother, Myrrha, was the daughter of the king of Syria. By some boastful words, unimportant in themselves, Myrrha attracted the wrath of Aphrodite, who filled her with a burning desire for her own father. Myrrha's father, of course, would never agree to sleep with his daughter, but Myrrha managed to fool him, and she slept with him for twelve nights. Until the king discovered that his new lover was his daughter, went mad with rage, and chased her, to take the course of action that honour and piety dictated – kill her. I know, I know. But the gods took pity on Myrrha and changed her into a tree, the Myrrha tree.

From that tree, Adonis was born.

Aphrodite had been keeping an eye on the tree. She was not entirely sure that the woman had suffered enough; trees, after all, live very long lives. So she was there when a crack opened in the wood, and a baby rolled out of it. She was almost ready to kill the child with a kick, but then she caught a glimpse of him – and was enchanted.

Aphrodite crouched, to take a closer look at the baby, and the baby looked back. He was beautiful. In fact he was the most beautiful baby Aphrodite had ever seen. Dazzled, she scooped him up. She could not let him die, whatever the sins of his mother. She would never let beauty die.

But Aphrodite wasn't a mother, and she didn't want to be one. So she spoke to Persephone, Queen of the Underworld, and asked her to take care of little Adonis. The baby was too just too charming for Persephone to say no.

And so Adonis grew up among goddesses and nymphs, between the world below and the world above, between caves and glades and dark secluded pools. He learnt to run, he learnt to hunt, to gather plants and grow them, and all those who met him were charmed by him. Soon he grew into an extremely handsome young man, nimble and strong; the sort of young man Aphrodite liked to make love to, for hours on end.

Persephone too.

The goddesses started to quarrel over Adonis. Each of them wanted him for herself. Aphrodite had found him, but Persephone had raised him. Their quarrel became a fight, and Zeus, worried that things were getting out of hand, decided to step in: Adonis, he decided, would

spend one-third of the year with Persephone, one-third with Aphrodite, and one-third doing whatever he felt like doing. It was more or less the same pact he had struck for Persephone years before, when she was the object of a struggle between her mother and the Lord of the Underworld. It had worked back then, and Zeus didn't see why it shouldn't work again.

And it did work, for a while. Adonis always spent his own third of the year with Aphrodite, the goddess of sensuousness, making love in the deepest woods, on the most secluded beaches. With every day that passed he became a better hunter, and a better lover, and all was good – for a while. But all good things come to an end.

No one is sure who sent the boar. Someone says it was Ares, the god of war, who was jealous of his lover Aphrodite; others say it was Artemis, whom Adonis had slighted somehow; or Apollo, for a vendetta against Aphrodite. I suspect it might have been just bad luck. Be that as it may, a mighty boar appeared one day, and caught Adonis by surprise; and all his skills, all his courage and strength were not enough against this explosion of wildness. The boar charged Adonis, and slashed his flesh, and broke his ribs, and left him there, broken, bloodied, dying.

Aphrodite ran to her lover; she knew she couldn't save him, but she wanted to be with him as he died. And she was there, and she was crying, and she was shedding tears while he was shedding blood. For each drop of blood the mortal shed that day, the goddess shed a tear.

But then a miracle happened, fuelled by grief and love. Where Aphrodite's tears touched the soil, they didn't

disappear; they quavered for a few moments, and then a rose was born from them. Where Adonis' drops of blood touched the soil, they grew up in the shape of anemones.

Adonis died, as all mortals must; Aphrodite was left with his lifeless body, surrounded now by a beautiful expanse of scented flowers.

And I think this is the way we live and the way we die. Nothing is wasted in nature, nothing is lost: we come from nature and to nature we will return, and we are part of nature throughout our lives. Our lives will be ended by a wild boar's tusk, but while we wait, we love and we hunt and we run, born from a secret womb, and destined, one day, to make flowers with our blood.



comfort • desire • meaning

Common Ground

ROB COWEN



🕒 12 minutes

Rob Cowen teaches us to find nature on our doorstep,
and to seek a different rhythm for our lives.



Maps transform us. They make birds of us all. They reveal the patterns of our existence and unlock our cages. If it wasn't for that map, a second-hand Ordnance Survey given as a Christmas present, maybe none of this would have happened. It was New Year's Eve and I lay on the bed with the town unfolded before me. I felt tired; constrained; racked with cabin fever. I needed to get out. From a circle of Biro drawn around my new house I flew up and over the unfamiliar rooftops and roads, past shops, schools, hair salons and bookmakers, seeking the nearest open ground. Below me suburbia slunk down a shallow hill towards an endless patchwork of delineated farmland. Hemmed in between the two, I saw it: a tract of white paper, tree symbols and the varicose vein of a river. It lured me down, eyes to paper, body to freezing earth.

Somewhere a bell struck five as I cut through the start-stop traffic of the ring road. Exhaust fumes swirled fog-like, landlocked by the plummeting temperature. Underfoot the afternoon rain was hardening into a slippery film; frost feathered lawns. That peculiar post-Christmas malaise, thick with burning coal, pressed down on the houses. As the shrivelled sun disappeared into the mass of pitched roofs, chimney stacks and telegraph wires, I flowed on past a plastic Santa on a roof with no chimney and along a trench of emerging street lights. Either side of me, rows of Victorian terraces morphed into post-war semis before, finally, modern red-brick boxes whirled off the road in car-cluttered cul-de-sacs. Then, after a mile of walking, even their low walls and privet hedges began to thin. Through the gaps the dark, dank countryside of northern England rose like a great black wave.

At the bottom of the hill a rough track bisected the road suddenly and steadfastly, tracing a contour with nineteenth-century arrogance. It was a definitive border. Light and vegetation were in accord. Dimness shrouded the land beyond. Among the bare blackthorn, ash and spider-limbed elder, I spied relics: soot-blackened sandstone walls, riveted iron plates and the overgrown ditch and mound of a siding. It all uttered a single word: railway. A footstep and I had crossed from the bright lights and right angles of bulbs and bricks into black bushes and trees, whose infinitesimal branches overlapped the track like hair growing over a scar. Unwittingly the railway was fulfilling a different function now – this was the high water mark of the sprawl. Suburbia washed against its

southern bank in a mass of rickety fences and scattered bin bags disembowelled by brambles. Down its northern side the town dissolved into something other: a kind of wildness. Winter-beaten meadows stretched into wood before the earth rose again as field and hill that met sky in an unbroken ridge.

I hunkered down by a fence and tried to take it all in. Nothing stirred. There were hints of shapes forming in the distance – stands of larch, pylons, barns – but they were impossible to distinguish. The road I'd followed narrowed and wandered past a squat pub crouching in a hollow, then became lost in the rawness of fields. Tarmac turned to footpath, footpath into soil. Marking the border on opposite sides of the road were two vast oaks thirty metres high. Entwined above me their limbs created an arch, ancient sentinels guarding a forgotten world. I knew it, though. The urban fringe. The no man's land between town and country; this was the edge of things.

*

I can't say what imperceptible force drew me there, only that I needed to reach it. That frontier called me. Maybe a speck of its soil carried in a starling's foot had been drawn down deep into my respiratory system, circulating around my bloodstream and lodging on my temporal lobes, establishing itself as a point of reckoning. Whatever it was, I felt a sense of returning, like a bee to a hive. Weeks had passed since I'd left London with the weightlessness of new horizons in Yorkshire, the place I'd grown up, but far from being the liberating experience I'd imagined,

moving house had proved to be an imprisonment. For too long I'd been stuck in an unending cycle of working, painting walls and unpacking boxes, sleeping fitfully in rooms that stank of gloss, acid in my throat, numbed by the cold of open windows. I'd find a whole day had slipped by as I sifted through collections of things that suddenly seemed to belong to a previous life. I'd hardly ventured into the world outside. Soon the shortening days and wintry gloom made familiarising myself with new surroundings even harder. All my routines were jumbled; every light switch was in the wrong place. In truth, the act of handing over the keys to my London flat had signified a greater shift: present to past. All the maps I had once navigated my life by – the routes to work, streets, cafés, flats, parks and pubs – were redundant. They covered a region 220 miles to the south. I was stuck somewhere else, between tenses, between spaces, between lives.

Everything changes continuously, of course, nature is perpetual flux, but we are good at suppressing uncomfortable reminders of the greater cycles. We rope ourselves to imagined, controllable permanence. Clocks are wound to the rhythms of modern anthropocentric existence: the nine-to-five grind, career trajectories, the working week, Saturday nights out, summer holidays, twenty-five-year mortgages, pension plans, retirement. It's how the adverts metronome our lives. Yet staring out over that edge rendered such things irrelevant. Time was a different animal, indifferent, a deer running unseen through the trees. There was nothing by which I might measure the moments passing until the rise and fall of a siren shrieked

through town, then silence again. With the cold, clear, descending dark came euphoria; it prickled my neck and released the atom-deep sensation of otherworldliness. It was the blur of joy and terror felt when facing something prior to and greater than the self. My pulse slowed as the adrenalin dispersed and for a second I imagined it was my cells recalibrating to the deeper rhythms of the dark, my body resetting to the land.

Once upon a time the edges were the places we knew best. They were our common ground. Times were hard and spare but the margins around homesteads, villages and towns sustained us. People grazed livestock and collected deadfall for fuel. Access and usage became enshrined as rights and recognised in law. Pigs trotted through trees during ‘pannage’ – the acorn season from Michaelmas to Martinmas – certain types of game were hunted for the table and heather and fern were cut for bedding. Mushrooms, fruits and berries would be foraged and dried for winter; honey taken from wild beehives; chestnuts hoarded, ground and stored as flour. The fringes provided playgrounds for kids and illicit bedrooms for lovers. Whether consciously or not, these spaces kept us in time and rooted to the rhythms of land and nature. Feet cloyed with clay, we oriented ourselves by rain and sun, day and night, seasons, the slow spinning of stars.

Humans are creatures of habit: we all still go to edges to get perspective, to be sustained and reborn. Recreation is still re-creation after a fashion, only now it occurs in largely virtual worlds. Clouds, hyper-real TV shows, 3D films, multiplayer games, online stores and social media

networks – these are today’s areas of common ground, the terrains where people meet, work, hunt, play, learn, fall in love even. Ours is a world growing yet shrinking, connected yet isolated, all-knowing but without knowledge. It is one of breadth, shallowness and the endless swimming through cyberspace. All is speed and surface. Digging down deeper into an overlooked patch of ground, one that (in a global sense, at least) few people will ever know about and even fewer visit, felt like the antithesis to all of this. And it felt vitally important. You see, I still believe in the importance of edges. Lying just beyond our doors and fences, the enmeshed borders where human and nature collide are microcosms of our world at large, an extraordinary, exquisite world that is growing closer to the edge every day. These spaces reassert a vital truth: nature isn’t just some remote mountain or protected park. It is all around us. It is in us. It is us.



anxiety • comfort • self-knowledge

CHAOS

'The Dead Moon'

ROSALIND KERVEN



⌚ 10 minutes

Sometimes a negative form of Chaos encroaches on our lives, and we feel the presence of darkness, and unpleasant beings. But never forget that it is possible to fight back...



Keep away from the bog.

It's riddled with unspeakable things. It stinks of death. There are bogles and rotting corpses; dark, nauseous shapes that weave in and out of the mud like worms. There are fleshless, grasping hands out there, and disembodied mouths that gape open and suck everything into them. There are ghosts and creeping goblins, witches on cat-back, and treacherous, flickering will-o'-the-wisps.

It's an evil place to pass through, especially at night. Many have been lost there. That's why the moon herself came down here once, to try and make things better. She came in disguise, wrapped in a black, hooded cloak so that every inch of her was hidden, slipping down from the

sky like a shadow. Through the shifting vapours of the boglands she drifted, gazing this way and that, shuddering at the foul things that surrounded her.

Suddenly, a cry went up: a scream of horror, melting into agony and anguish. Close by the moon was a man: a big, strong, handsome fellow, who was bawling like a baby as the bogles and spooks sank their claws and venomous suckers into him. They tore off his topcoat and shirt, his boots and breeches until he was naked and blue with cold. Cackling and slurping, they began to draw him down into the bottomless, impenetrable dark of the bog.

The moon couldn't bear it. She threw back her hood and let her light shine out. In its beam, the dark things shrivelled and shrank away, and the man found the strength to flail and struggle. He hauled himself from the heaving mud and kicked out at the monsters that had snared him. Thanks to the good moon, he could now see the path clearly, which only moments before had been lost to him. He ran down it with a cry of joy, heading towards dry land and the village.

But there was no escape for the moon: now the evil ones had seen her, they would not let her escape. They came crowing round, fingering her cloak with their bare-boned hands, snorting poison out through their gaping nostrils and covering her with reeking slime. Twisted limbs shot out to trip her. When she was down, they dragged her into a deep hole and pushed a heavy stone on top.

So the moon was lost.

After that, every night was completely dark in the boglands. Even the stars shunned the sky that hung over

those parts. It was terrible for the folk who lived there. Their lives dwindled. No one dared go out after nightfall. They sealed their windows tightly and laid salt, straw and buttons on the sills for protection.

As for the bogles and ghosts and witches, they grew even bolder. They came creeping out of the bog, slithering over mud and grass and right into the village. No one even dared to slip out to the privy at night, for the beasties hung around the houses, waiting for a door to open. It was human flesh they craved, and also human souls. Where else could they sate their hunger, since folk didn't travel through the bog anymore?

At first, no one could guess why the moon had stopped shining. But then the traveller she had rescued on that fateful night found the courage to look back on what had happened. He recalled how, just as he was about to die, a dazzling light had saved him. He brooded on the memory. Supposing, he thought, the moon herself had sacrificed her life for him? Guilt overwhelmed him.

He set off to see the wise old woman who lived in the ruined old mill. She listened carefully to the outpourings of this troubled soul, then took her Bible from the high shelf, glanced quickly into her mirror, and gazed long and deep into her brew pot. Finally, she told him what to do.

The traveller went back to the village and knocked on his neighbours' doors. He assembled a band of nine strong men. When dusk fell, each man put a stone in his mouth, broke a twig from a hazel tree and grasped it in his hand.

The twilight thickened into darkness. The nine men did what none had done for the past three months: they

walked out into the night. Shoulder to shoulder they went, but none spoke or even sighed, for the wise woman had warned them to keep absolutely silent.

They stepped on to the bog. The wind screamed at them. They were surrounded by hisses and whispers. In single file now, they pressed on. This is what they were seeking: a candle, a cross and a coffin.

The man who was leading the way halted suddenly. He nudged the man behind him and pointed. The signal passed quickly back along the line. The nine men all stared...

For a will-o'-the-wisp was flickering before them: that was surely meant as the candle. It lit up a stump of dry, crumbling wood with two gnarled branches jutting from each side: that was the cross. From its base there stretched an expanse of long, cold stone.

That was the moon's coffin.

The nine men gathered around it. In the ghostly light they looked at each other and nodded, then in unison their lips began to move. No sound came from them, for they must not break their silence. But in their minds, in their hearts, they recited the Lords' Prayer.

They recited it forwards, to honour the Cross. They recited it backwards, to drive away the beasties and bogles. Then they leaned forward together, and heaved up the stone.

It came free with a terrible wrenching and creaking sound, spraying them all – near blinding them – with bog water and mud. For an instant, they caught a glimpse of a pale, luminescent face beneath the stone, filled with

unearthly beauty. Then light rushed past them, overwhelming them with such exquisite sadness and joy that each man felt the ground beneath him falling away...

When they came to, there was the moon, back in her rightful place in the sky! The nine bold men who had rescued her were all lying on high ground. Below them, in the moonlight, the bog lay strangely still.

From then on, the folk who lived around the bogs had nothing more to fear. For the gentle moon was ever mindful of how they had rescued her, and vowed to cast her light most strongly over their own bleak lands for ever more.



companionship • hope • magic

Black Swan Green

DAVID MITCHELL



⌚ 6 minutes

It is 1982, and a thirteen-year-old boy is about to learn how difficult life can be – and that Chaos lurks in unexpected places.



Run across a field of daisies at warp speed but keep your eyes on the ground. It's ace. Petalled stars and dandelion comets streak the green universe. Moran and I got to the barn at the far side, dizzy with intergalactic travel. I was laughing more than Moran 'cause Moran's dry trainer wasn't dry any more, it was glistening in cow shit. Bales of straw made a ramp up to the griddle barn roof, so up we climbed. The cockerel tree you can see from my bedroom wasn't running left to right now, it was running right to left. 'Skill place for a machine-gun nest, this barn,' I said, displaying my military expertise.

Moran squiggled off the shitty trainer and lay back.

I lay back too. The rusty iron was warm as a hotty.

'This is the life', sighed Moran, after a bit.

'You can say that again,' I said, after a bit.

'This is the life,' said Moran, straight off.

I *knew* he would. 'That's so original.'

Sheep and lambs were bleating, fields behind us.

A tractor was countering, fields ahead.

'Does *your* old man ever get pissed?' Moran asked.

If I said yes I'd be lying, but if I said no it'd look gay. 'He has a drink or two, when my uncle Brian visits.'

'Not a drink or two. I mean does he get so *fucking plastered* he... he can hardly speak?

'No.'

That *No* turned the three feet between into three miles.

'No.' Moran'd shut his eyes. 'Don't look the type, your dad.'

'But yours doesn't, either. He's really friendly and funny...'

An aeroplane glinted, mercury bright in the dark high blue.

'Maxine calls it like this, she calls it "Daddy's going dark". She's right. He goes dark. He starts... y'know, on a few cans, and gets loud and makes shite jokes we have to laugh at. Shouts and stuff. The neighbours bang on the wall to complain. Dad bangs back, calls 'em all the names under the sun... then he locks himself in his room but he's got bottles in there. We hear them smash. One by one. Then he sleeps it off. Then afterwards, when he's all so sorry, it's all, 'Oh, I'm never touchin' the stuff again...'. That's almost worse... Tell you what it's like, it's like this whiny shitty nasty weepy man who isn't my dad takes my dad over for however long the bender lasts, but

only I – and Mum and Kelly and Sally and Max – know it *isn't him*. The rest of the world doesn't know that, see. They just say, Frank Moran showing his true colours, that is. But it *ain't*.' Moran twisted his head at me. 'But it is. But it *ain't*. But it is. But it *ain't*. Oh, how am I s'posed to know?'

A painful minute went by.

Green is made of yellow and blue, nothing else, but when you *look* at green, where've the yellow and blue gone? Somehow this is to do with Moran's dad. Somehow this is to do with everyone and everything. But too many things'd've gone wrong if I'd tried to say this to Moran.

Moransniffed. 'Fancy a nice, cool bottle of Woodpecker?'

'Cider? You've brought cider?'

'No. My dad drunk 'em all. *But*,' Moran fumbled in his bag, 'I've got a can of Irn Bru.'

Irn Bru's fizzy liquid bubblegum, but I said, 'Sure,' 'cause I hadn't brought any drink myself and Irn Bru's better than nothing. I'd imagined I could drink from fresh springs but the only water I'd seen so far was that earthy ditch.

The Irn Bro exploded in Moran's hand like a grenade. 'Shit!'

'Watch out with that Irn Bru. It'll be all shaken up.'

'You don't flaming' say so!' Moran gave me first swig, as he licked his hand clean. In return, I gave him some Cadbury's Caramel. It'd oozed out of its wrapper, but we picked off the bits of pocket fluff and it tasted okay. I got a hay fever attack and sneezed ten or twenty times into a nuggety hanky.

A vapour tail gashed the sky.
But the sky healed itself. Without fuss.



companionship • resilience

LIGHTNESS

Speech made on his seventieth birthday

MARK TWAIN



⌚ 6 minutes

If you want to reach a ripe old age, you should follow a healthy lifestyle. Or possibly not.



I have achieved my seventy years in the usual way: by sticking strictly to a scheme of life which would kill anybody else. It sounds like an exaggeration, but that is really the common rule for attaining old age. [...] I will offer here, as a sound maxim, this: that we can't reach old age by another man's road.

I will now teach, offering my way of life to whomsoever desires to commit suicide by the scheme which has enabled me to beat the doctor and the hangman for seventy years. Some of the details may sound untrue, but they are not. I am not here to deceive: I am here to teach.

We have no permanent habits until we are forty. Then they begin to harden, presently they petrify, then business begins. Since forty I have been regular about going to bed

and getting up – and that is one of the main things. I have made it a rule to go to bed when there wasn't anybody left to sit up with; and I have made it a rule to get up when I had to. This has resulted in an unswerving regularity of irregularity. It has saved me sound, but it would injure another person.

In the matter of diet – which is another main thing – I have been persistently strict in sticking to the things which didn't agree with me until one or the other of us got the best of it. Until lately I got the best of it myself. But last spring I stopped frolicking with mince-pie after midnight; up to then I had always believed it wasn't loaded. For thirty years I have taken coffee and bread at eight in the morning, and no bite nor sup until seven-thirty in the evening. Eleven hours. That is alright for me, and is wholesome, because I have never had a headache in my life, but headachy people would not reach seventy comfortably by that road, and they would be foolish to try it. And I wish to urge upon you this – which I think is wisdom – that if you find you can't make seventy by any but an uncomfortable road, don't you go. [...]

I have made it a rule never to smoke more than one cigar at a time. I have no other restriction as regards smoking. [...] As an example to others, and not that I care for moderation myself, it has always been my rule never to smoke when asleep, and never to refrain when awake. It is a good rule. I mean, for me; but some of you know quite well that it wouldn't answer for everybody that's trying to get to be seventy.

I smoke in bed until I have to go to sleep; I wake up in

the night, sometimes once, sometimes twice, sometimes three times, and I never waste any of these opportunities to smoke. This habit is so old and dear and precious to me that I would feel as you, sir, would feel if you should lose the only moral you've got [...] if you've got one: I am making no charges. [...]

As for drinking, I have no rule about that. When the others drink I like to help; otherwise I remain dry, by habit and preference. This dryness does not hurt me, but it could easily hurt you, because you are different. Let it alone.

Since I was seven years old I have seldom taken a dose of medicine, and have still seldom needed one. But up to seven I lived exclusively on allopathic medicines. Not that I needed them, for I don't think I did; it was for economy; my father took a drug-store for a debt, and it made cod-liver oil cheaper than the other breakfast foods. We had nine barrels of it, and it lasted me seven years. Then I was weaned. [...] By the time the drugstore was exhausted my health was established, and there has never been much the matter with me since. But you know very well it would be foolish for the average child to start for seventy on that basis. It happened to be just the thing for me, but that was merely an accident; it couldn't happen again in a century.

I have never taken any exercise, except sleeping and resting, and I never intended to take any. Exercise is loathsome. And it cannot be any benefit when you are tired: and I was always tired. But let another person try my way, and see where he will come out.

I desire now to repeat and emphasise that maxim: we can't reach old age by another man's road. My habits protect my life, but they would assassinate you.



irony • resilience • self-knowledge • temptation

'On Running After One's Hat'

G. K. CHESTERTON



⌚ 10 minutes

Packed trains, tight deadlines, noisy neighbours: life can be bothersome. And yet, we might change the way we look at the things which annoy us, and that might transform them completely.



I feel an almost savage envy on hearing that London has been flooded in my absence, while I am in the mere country. My own Battersea has been, I understand, particularly favoured as a meeting of the waters. Battersea was already, as I need hardly say, the most beautiful of human localities. Now that it has the additional splendour of great sheets of water, there must be something quite incomparable in the landscape (or waterscape) of my own romantic town. Battersea must be a vision of Venice. The boat that brought the meat from the butcher's must have shot along those lanes of rippling silver with the strange smoothness of the gondola. The greengrocer who brought cabbages to the corner of the Latchmere Road must have leant upon the oar with the unearthly grace of the gondolier. There

is nothing so perfectly poetical as an island; and when a district is flooded it becomes an archipelago.

Some consider such romantic views of flood or fire slightly lacking in reality. But really this romantic view of such inconveniences is quite as practical as the other. The true optimist who sees in such things an opportunity for enjoyment is quite as logical and much more sensible than the ordinary 'Indignant Ratepayer' who sees in them an opportunity for grumbling. Real pain, as in the case of being burnt at Smithfield or having a toothache, is a positive thing; it can be supported, but scarcely enjoyed. But, after all, our toothaches are the exception, and as for being burnt at Smithfield, it only happens to us at the very longest intervals. And most of the inconveniences that make men swear or women cry are really sentimental or imaginative inconveniences – things altogether of the mind. For instance, we often hear grown-up people complaining of having to hang about a railway station and wait for a train. Did you ever hear a small boy complain of having to hang about a railway station and wait for a train? No; for to him to be inside a railway station is to be inside a cavern of wonder and a palace of poetical pleasures. Because to him the red light and the green light on the signal are like a new sun and a new moon. Because to him when the wooden arm of the signal falls down suddenly, it is as if a great king had thrown down his staff as a signal and started a shrieking tournament of trains. I myself am of little boys' habit in this matter. They also serve who only stand and wait for the two-fifteen. Their meditations may be full of rich and fruitful things. Many

of the most purple hours of my life have been passed at Clapham Junction, which is now, I suppose, under water. I have been there in many moods so fixed and mystical that the water might well have come up to my waist before I noticed it particularly. But in the case of all such annoyances, as I have said, everything depends upon the emotional point of view. You can safely apply the test to almost every one of the things that are currently talked of as the typical nuisance of daily life.

For instance, there is a current impression that it is unpleasant to have to run after one's hat. Why should it be unpleasant to the well-ordered and pious mind? Not merely because it is running, and running exhausts one. The same people run much faster in games and sports. The same people run much more eagerly after an uninteresting, little leather ball than they will after a nice silk hat. There is an idea that it is humiliating to run after one's hat; and when people say it is humiliating they mean that it is comic. It certainly is comic; but man is a very comic creature, and most of the things he does are comic – eating, for instance. And the most comic things of all are exactly the things that are most worth doing – such as making love. A man running after a hat is not half so ridiculous as a man running after a wife.

Now a man could, if he felt rightly in the matter, run after his hat with the manliest ardour and the most sacred joy. He might regard himself as a jolly huntsman pursuing a wild animal, for certainly no animal could be wilder. In fact, I am inclined to believe that hat-hunting on windy days will be the sport of the upper classes in the future.

There will be a meet of ladies and gentlemen on some high ground on a gusty morning. They will be told that the professional attendants have started a hat in such-and-such a thicket, or whatever be the technical term. Notice that this employment will in the fullest degree combine sport with humanitarianism. The hunters would feel that they were not inflicting pain. Nay, they would feel that they were inflicting pleasure, rich, almost riotous pleasure, upon the people who were looking on. When last I saw an old gentleman running after his hat in Hyde Park, I told him that a heart so benevolent as his ought to be filled with peace and thanks at the thought of how much unaffected pleasure his every gesture and bodily attitude were at that moment giving to the crowd.

The same principle can be applied to every other typical domestic worry. A gentleman trying to get a fly out of the milk or a piece of cork out of his glass of wine often imagines himself to be irritated. Let him think for a moment of the patience of anglers sitting by dark pools, and let his soul be immediately irradiated with gratification and repose. Again, I have known some people of very modern views driven by their distress to the use of theological terms to which they attached no doctrinal significance, merely because a drawer was jammed tight and they could not pull it out. A friend of mine was particularly afflicted in this way. Every day his drawer was jammed, and every day in consequence it was something else that rhymes to it. But I pointed out to him that this sense of wrong was really subjective and relative; it rested entirely upon the assumption that the drawer could, should, and would come out

easily. ‘But if,’ I said, ‘you picture to yourself that you are pulling against some powerful and oppressive enemy, the struggle will become merely exciting and not exasperating. Imagine that you are tugging up a lifeboat out of the sea. Imagine that you are roping up a fellow-creature out of an Alpine crevass. Imagine even that you are a boy again and engaged in a tug-of-war between French and English.’ Shortly after saying this I left him; but I have no doubt at all that my words bore the best possible fruit. I have no doubt that every day of his life he hangs on to the handle of that drawer with a flushed face and eyes bright with battle, uttering encouraging shouts to himself, and seeming to hear all round him the roar of an applauding ring.

So I do not think that it is altogether fanciful or incredible to suppose that even the floods in London may be accepted and enjoyed poetically. Nothing beyond inconvenience seems really to have been caused by them; and inconvenience, as I have said, is only one aspect, and that the most unimaginative and accidental aspect of a really romantic situation. An adventure is only an inconvenience rightly considered. An inconvenience is only an adventure wrongly considered. The water that girdled the houses and shops of London must, if anything, have only increased their previous witchery and wonder. For as the Roman Catholic priest in the story said: ‘Wine is good with everything except water,’ and on a similar principle, water is good with everything except wine.



irony • shift of perspective

WONDER

'The Messenger'

ALGERNON BLACKWOOD



⌚ 10 minutes

Sometimes a sense of wonder hits us unexpectedly. It might come from the most mundane of sources – revealing to us that those sources were never mundane in the first place.



I have never been afraid of ghostly things, attracted rather with a curious live interest, though it is always out of doors that strange Presences get nearest to me, and in Nature I have encountered warnings, messages, presentiments, and the like, that, by way of help or guidance, have later justified themselves. I have, therefore, welcomed them. But in the little rooms of houses things of much value rarely come, for the thick air chokes the wires, as it were, and distorts or mutilates the clear delivery.

But the other night, here in the carpenter's house, where my attic windows beckon to the mountains and the woods, I woke with the uncomfortably strong suggestion that something was on the way, and that I was not ready.

It came along the by-ways of deep sleep. I woke abruptly, alarmed before I was even properly awake. Something was approaching with great swiftness – and I was unprepared.

Across the lake there were faint signs of colour behind the distant Alps, but terraces of mist still lay grey above the vineyards, and the slim poplar, whose tip was level with my face, no more than rustled in the wind of dawn. A shiver, not brought to me by any wind, ran through my nerves, for I knew with a certainty no arguing could lessen nor dispel that something from immensely far away was deliberately now approaching me. The touch of wonder in advance of it was truly awful; its splendour, size, and grandeur belonged to conditions I had surely never known. It came through empty spaces – from another world. While I lay asleep it had been already on the way.

I stood there a moment, seeking for some outward sign that might betray its nature. The last stars were fading in the northern sky, and blue and dim lay the whole long line of the Jura, cloaked beneath still slumbering forests. There was a rumbling of a distant train. Now and then a dog barked in some outlying farm. The Night was up and walking, though as yet she moved but slowly from the sky. Shadows still draped the world. And the warning that had reached me first in sleep rushed through my tingling nerves once more with a certainty not far removed from shock. Something from another world was drawing every minute nearer, with a speed that made me tremble and half-breathless. It would presently arrive. It would stand close beside me and look straight into my face. Into these very eyes that searched the mist and shadow for an outward

sign it would gaze intimately with a Message brought for me alone. But into these narrow walls it could only come with difficulty. The message would be maimed. There still was time for preparation. And I hurried into clothes and made my way downstairs and out into the open air.

Thus, at first, by climbing fast, I kept ahead of it, and soon the village lay beneath me in its nest of shadow, and the limestone ridges far above dropped nearer. But the awe and terrible deep wonder did not go. Along these mountain paths, whose every inch was so intimate that I could follow them even in the dark, this sense of breaking grandeur clung to my footsteps, keeping close. Nothing upon the earth – familiar, friendly, well-known, little earth – could have brought this sense that pressed upon the edges of true reverence. It was the awareness that some speeding messenger from spaces far, far beyond the world would presently stand close and touch me, would gaze into my little human eyes, would leave its message as of life or death, and then depart upon its fearful way again – it was this that conveyed the feeling of apprehension that went with me.

And instinctively, while rising higher and higher, I chose the darkest and most sheltered way. I sought the protection of the trees, and ran into the deepest vaults of the forest. The moss was soaking wet beneath my feet, and the thousand tapering spires of the pines dipped upwards into a sky already brightening with palest gold and crimson. There was a whispering and a rustling overhead as the trees, who know everything before it comes, announced to one another that the thing I sought to hide

from was already very, very near. Plunging deeper into the woods to hide, this detail of sure knowledge followed me and laughed: that the speed of this august arrival was one which made the greatest speed I ever dreamed of a mere standing still...

I hid myself where possible in the darkness that was growing every minute more rare. The air was sharp and exquisitely fresh. I heard birds calling. The low, wet branches kissed my face and hair. A sense of glad relief came over me that I had left the closeness of the little attic chamber, and that I should eventually meet this huge Newcomer in the wide, free spaces of the mountains. There must be room where I could hold myself unmanacled to meet it... The village lay far beneath me, a patch of smoke and mist and soft red-brown roofs among the vineyards. And then my gaze turned upwards, and through a rift in the close-wrought ceiling of the trees I saw the clearness of the open sky. A strip of cloud ran through it, carrying off the Night's last little dream... and down into my heart dropped instantly that cold breath of awe I have known but once in life, when staring through the stupendous mouth within the Milky Way – that opening into the outer spaces of eternal darkness, unlit by any single star, men call the Coal Hole.

The futility of escape then took me bodily, and I renounced all further flight. From this speeding Messenger there was no hiding possible. His splendid shoulders already brushed the sky. I heard the rushing of his awful wings... yet in that deep, significant silence with which light steps upon the clouds of morning.

And simultaneously I left the woods behind me and stood upon a naked ridge of rock that all night long had watched the stars.

Then terror passed away like magic. Cool winds from the valleys bore me up. I heard the tinkling of a thousand cowbells from pastures far below in a score of hidden valleys. The cold departed, and with it every trace of little fears. My eyes seemed for an instant blinded, and I knew that deep sense of joy which seems so 'unearthly' that it almost stains the sight with the veil of tears. The soul sank to her knees in prayer and worship.

For the messenger from another world had come. He stood beside me on that dizzy ledge. Warmth clothed me, and I knew myself akin to deity. He stood there, gazing straight into my little human eyes. He touched me everywhere. Above the distant Alps the sun came up. His eye looked close into my own.



anxiety • instinct • power

'Going to Hell. Instructions and advice'

KELLY LINK



⌚ 5 minutes

Go to hell. No, really.



Listen, because I'm only going to do this once. You'll have to get there by way of London. Take the overnight train from Waverly. Sit in the last car. Speak to no one. Don't fall asleep.

When you arrive at Kings Cross, go down into the Underground. Get on the Northern line. Sit in the last car. Speak to no one. Don't fall asleep.

The Northern line stops at Angel, at London Bridge, at Elephant and Castle, Tooting Broadway. The last marked station is Morden: stay in your seat. Other passengers will remain with you in the car. Speak to no one.

These are some of the unlisted stations you will pass: Howling Green. Duke's Pit. Sparrowkill. Stay in your seat. Don't fall asleep. If you look around the car, you may notice that the other passengers have started to glow. The bulbs on the car dim as the passengers give off more and

more light. If you look down you may find that you yourself are casting light into the dark car. The final stop is Bonehouse. [...]

It is late morning when you arrive at Bonehouse, but the sky is dark. As you walk, you must push aside the air, like heavy cloth. Your foot stumbles on the mute ground.

You are in a place where the sky presses down, and the buildings creep close along the streets, and all the doors stand open. Grass grows on the roofs of the houses; the roofs are packed sod, and the grass raises up tall like hair on a scalp. Follow the others. They are dead and know the way better than you. Speak to no one.

At last you will arrive at a door in an alley, with a dog asleep on the threshold. He has many heads and each head has many teeth, and his teeth are sharp and eager as knives.[...]

As the others step over the dog he doesn't wake. If you step over him, he will smell live flesh and he will tear you to pieces.

Take this perfume with you and when you come to Bonehouse, dab it behind your ears, at your wrists and elbows, at the back of your knees. Stroke it into the vee of your sex, as you would for a lover. The scent is heavy and rich, like the first cold handful of dirt tossed into the dug grave. It will trick the dog's nose.

Inside the door, there is no light but the foxes glow of your own body. The dead flicker like candles around you. They are burning their memories for warmth. They may brush up against you, drawn to what is stronger and hotter and brighter in you. Don't speak to them.

There are no walls, no roof above you except darkness. There are no doors, only the luminous windows that the dead have become. Unravel the left arm of his sweater and let it fall to the ground. [...]

If you don't let the sweater fall from your hands, if you follow the sleeve until it is only yarn, it will lead you to him. He won't be as you remember him, he's been eating his memories to keep warm. He is not asleep, but if you kiss him he'll wake up. Just like the fairy tales. His lips will be cold at first.

Say to him, Follow me, and unravel the right arm of the sweater. It will take you to a better place, little thief. If you do it right and don't look back, then you can steal him out of the Bonehouse.

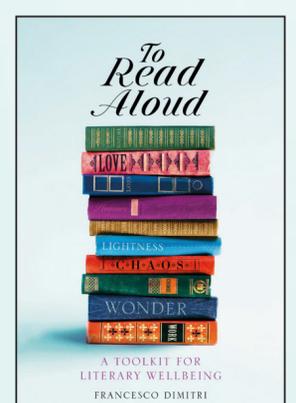


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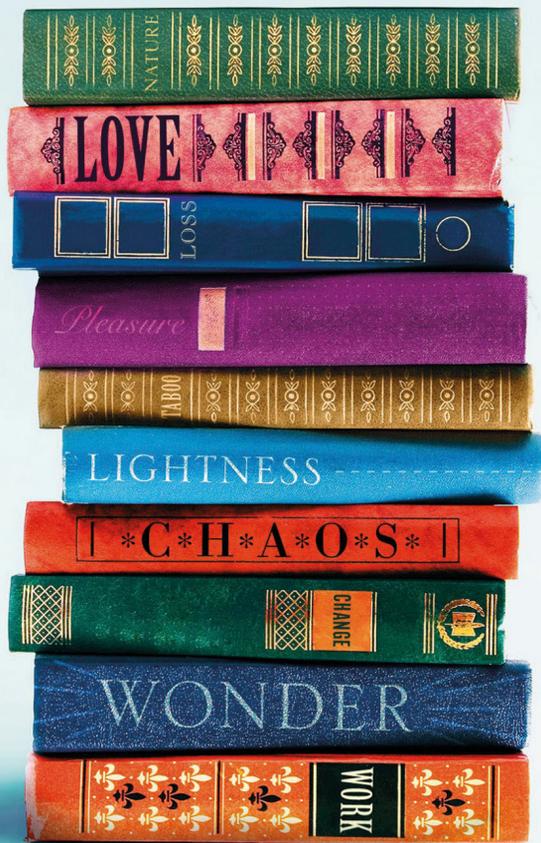


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