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The Infinities

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Extract

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Of the things we fashioned for them that they might be comforted, dawn is the one that works. When darkness sifts from the air like fine soft soot and light spreads slowly out of the east then all but the most wretched of humankind rally. It is a spectacle we immortals enjoy, this minor daily resurrection, often we will gather at the ramparts of the clouds and gaze down upon them, our little ones, as they bestir themselves to welcome the new day. What a silence falls upon us then, the sad silence of our envy. Many of them sleep on, of course, careless of our cousin Aurora's charming matutinal trick, but there are always the insomniacs, the restless ill, the lovelorn tossing on their solitary beds, or just the early-risers, the busy ones, with their knee-bends and their cold showers and their fussy little cups of black ambrosia. Yes, all who witness it greet the dawn with joy, more or less, except of course the condemned man, for whom first light will be the last, on earth.

Here is one, standing at a window in his father's house,

watching the day's early glow suffuse the sky above the massed trees beyond the railway line. He is condemned not to death, not yet, but to a life into which he feels he does not properly fit. He is barefoot, and wearing pyjamas that his mother on his arrival last night found for him somewhere in the house, threadbare cotton, pale blue with a bluer stripe—whose are they, whose were they? Could they be his, from long ago? If so, it is from very long ago, for he is big now and they are far too small, and pinch him at the armpits and the fork. But that is the way with everything in this house, everything pinches and chafes and makes him feel as if he were a child again. He is reminded of how when he was a little boy here his grandmother would dress him up for Christmas, or his birthday, or some other festival, tugging him this way and that and spitting on a finger to plaster down a stubborn curl, and how he would feel exposed, worse than naked, in those already outmoded scratchy short-trousered tweed suits the colour of porridge that the old woman made him wear, and the white shirts with starched collars and, worst of all, the tartan dicky bows that it afforded him a wan, vindictive pleasure to pull out to the limit of their elastic and let snap back with a pleasingly loud smack when someone was making a speech or singing a song or the priest was holding up the communion wafer like, he always thought, the nurse on the Hospital Sweepstakes tickets brandishing aloft the winning number. That is how it is: life, tight-buttoned life, fits him ill, making him too much aware of himself and what he glumly takes to be his unalterable littleness of spirit.

He hears from somewhere unseen the faint, muffled clopping of small hoofs; it will be the early postman on his pony, in Thurn und Taxis livery, with his tricorn cap and his post-horn looped on his shoulder.

The man at the window is called Adam. He is not yet thirty, the young son of an elderly father, 'product', as he once overheard that twice-married father say with a sardonic laugh, 'of my second coming.' Idly he admires the dense, mud-purple shadows under the trees. A kind of smoke hovers ankle-deep on the grey-seeming grass. Everything is different at this hour. An early blackbird flies across at a slant swiftly from somewhere to somewhere else, its lacquered wing catching an angled glint of sunlight, and he cannot but think with a pang of the early worm. He fancies he can hear faintly the fleet-winged creature's piping panic note.

Gradually now he is becoming aware of something he cannot identify, a tremor that is all around, as if the air itself were quaking. It grows more intense. Alarmed, he takes a soft step backwards into the protective dimness of the room. Clearly he can hear the sluggish thudding of his heart. A part of his mind knows what is happening but it is not the part that thinks. Everything is atremble now. Some small mechanism behind him in the room—he does not look, but it must be a clock—sets up in its innards an urgent, silvery tinkling. The floorboards creak in trepidation. Then from the left the thing appears, huge, blunt-headed, nudging its way blindly forward, and rolls to a shuddering halt and stands there in front of the trees, gasping clouds of steam. The lights are still on

in the carriages; they make the dawn draw back a little. There are bent heads in the long windows, like the heads of seals—are they all asleep?—and the conductor with his ticket thing is going up an aisle, clambering along hand over hand from seat-back to seat-back as if he were scaling a steep incline. The silence round about is large and somehow aggrieved. The engine gives a testy snort, seeming to paw the earth. Why it should stop at this spot every morning no one in the house can say. There is not another dwelling for miles, the line is clear in both directions, yet just here is where it halts. His mother has complained repeatedly to the railway company, and once even was moved to write to someone in the government, but got no reply, for all the renown of her husband's name. 'I would not mind,' she will say in a tone of mild sorrow, 'what noise it made going past—after all, your father in his wisdom insisted on us setting up home practically on the railway line—but the stopping is what wakes me.'

A dream that he dreamt in the night returns to him, a fragment of it. He was dashing through the dust of immemorial battle bearing something in his arms, large but not heavy, a precious but burdensome cargo—what was it?—and all about him were the mass of warriors bellowing and the ringing clash of swords and spears, the swish of arrows, the creak and crunch of chariot wheels. A venerable site, an antique war.

Thinking of his mother, he listens for her step above him, for he knows she is awake. Though the house is large and rambling the floors are mostly of polished bare

boards and sounds travel easily and far. He does not want to deal with his mother, just now. Indeed, he finds it always awkward to deal with her. It is not that he hates or even resents her, as so many mortal sons are said to resent and hate their mothers—they should try dealing with our frenzied and vindictive dams, up here on misty Mount Olympus—only he does not think she is like a mother at all. She is absurdly young, hardly twenty years older than he is, and seems all the time to be getting younger, or at least not older, so that he has the worrying sensation of steadily catching up on her. She too appears to be aware of this phenomenon, and to find it not at all strange. In fact, since he was old enough to notice how young she is he has detected now and then, or imagines he has detected, a certain tight-lipped briskness in her manner towards him, as if she were impatient for him to attain some impossible majority so that, coevals at last, they might turn arm in arm and set out together into a future that would be—what? Fatherless, now, for him, and, for her, husbandless. For his father is dying. That is why he is here, foolish in these too-small pyjamas, watching the dawn break on this midsummer day.

Shaken by thoughts of death and dying he forces himself to fix his attention on the train again. One of the seal-heads has turned and he is being regarded across the smoky expanse of lawn by a small boy with a pale, pinched face and enormous eyes. How intensely the child is staring at the house, how hungry his scrutiny—what is it he is seeking, what secret knowledge, what revelation? The young man is convinced the young boy

can see him, standing here, yet surely it cannot be—surely the window from outside is a black blank or, the other extreme, blindingly aflame with the white-gold glare of the sun that seemed to take such a long time to rise but now is swarming strongly up the eastern sky. Apart from those avidly questing eyes the boy's features are unremarkable, or at least are so from what of them can be made out at this distance. But what is it he is looking for, to make him stare so? Now the engine bethinks itself and gives a sort of shake, and a repeated loud metallic clank runs along the carriages from coupling to coupling, and with a groan the brutish thing begins to move off, and as it moves the risen sun strikes through each set of carriage windows in turn, taking its revenge on the still-burning light bulbs, putting them to shame with its irresistible harsh fire. The boy, craning, stares to the last.

Adam is cold, and the soles of his bare feet are sticking unpleasantly to the chill, tacky floorboards. He is not yet fully awake but in a state between sleep and waking in which everything appears unreally real. When he turns from the window he sees the early light falling in unaccustomed corners, at odd angles, and a bookshelf edge is sharp as the blade of a guillotine. From the depths of the room the convex glass cover of the clock on the mantelpiece, reflecting the window's light, regards him with a monocular, blank glare. He thinks again of the child on the train and is struck as so often by the mystery of otherness. How can he be a self and others others since the others too are selves, to themselves? He knows, of course, that it is no mystery but a matter merely of

perspective. The eye, he tells himself, the eye makes the horizon. It is a thing he has often heard his father say, cribbed from someone else, he supposes. The child on the train was a sort of horizon to him and he a sort of horizon to the child only because each considered himself to be at the centre of something—to be, indeed, that centre itself—and that is the simple solution to the so-called mystery. And yet.

He pads across the floor—at his passing that busy clock on the mantel gives a single soft admonitory chime—and opens the door into the hall and stops short with a grunt of fright, his heart setting up again its slurred clamour, like an excited dog pawing to be let out.

He quickly sees that the figure in the hall is only his sister. She is squatting on her haunches at one of the little slanted doors in the white-painted panelling that closes off the space under the stairs. 'For God's sake!' he says. 'What are you doing?'

She turns up to him her miniature white face and yet again he sees in his mind the child's face at the train window. 'Mice,' she says.

He sighs. She is in one of her states. 'For God's sake,' he repeats, wearily this time.

She goes back to rummaging in the cupboard and he folds his arms and leans one shoulder against the wall and watches her, shaking his head. She is nineteen and so much younger than her years, and yet possessed too of an awful ancientness—'That one,' Granny Godley used to say of her darkly, 'that one has been here before.' He asks how she knows there are mice in the cupboard and

she laughs dismissively. 'Not the cupboard, you fool,' she says, the sleek dark back of her head—another seal!—aquiver with contempt. 'In my room.'

She rises, wiping her hands on her skinny flanks. She does not meet his eye but bites her lip and frowns off to the side; she does not meet anyone's eye, if she can help it.

'What is that you're wearing?' he asks.

It is another pair of ill-fitting pyjamas, these in faded blue silk, hanging limp on her meagre frame, the sleeves and legs absurdly too long; hers are too long, his too short, as if to mark something sadly comical about them both. 'They're Pa's,' she says sulkily.

He sighs again. 'Oh, Pete.' Yet who is he to talk?—whose cast-offs is he wearing?

His sister's name is Petra, he calls her Pete. She is tiny and thin with a heart-shaped face and haunted eyes. For a long time she had her head shaved bare but now the hair is beginning to grow back, a bulrush-brown nap that covers her skull evenly all over. Her hands are the scrabbly pink claws of a rodent. The mice, her brother thinks, must recognise one of their own.

'How do you know?' he asks.

'How do I know what?'—a petulant whine.

'About the mice.'

'I see them. They run around the floor in the dark.'

'In the dark. And you see them.'

She blinks slowly and swallows, as if she might be about to cry, but it is only a tic, one among the many that afflict her. 'Leave me alone,' she mutters.

He is so much larger than she is.

As a child she used to sleepwalk, appearing at the top of the stairs with her eyes rolled up into her head and her mouse-claws lifted in front of her chest. At the memory the small hairs stir at the back of Adam's neck. His loony sister, hearing voices, seeing things.

With a cocked big toe he pushes shut the cupboard door. She makes a gesture towards it, her left arm jerking out stiffly from her side and a finger childishly pointing and then the arm falling weakly back. 'I thought there were traps,' she says sulkily. 'There used to be traps kept in there.'

When she did that with her arm he caught a whiff of her, a musty, greyish smell, like the smell in the bedroom of an invalid. She does not bathe enough. Her mother says she despairs of her. As if they had not all done that, long ago, except for Pa, of course, who claims she is his inspiration, his muse made flesh, the invariable quantity in all his equations. But Pa claims many things. Or claimed: for Pa is in the past tense, now.

The light here in the hall is still dim but the sun is burning gaudily in the front door's stained-glass panes as if, Adam thinks, he and his sister were confined indoors while outside a gay party is in full swing. In their clownishly ill-fitting pairs of pyjamas they stand before each other in silence, the large young man and the diminutive girl, at a loss, each thinking and yet not thinking of what it is that constrains them so: the fact of their dying father, whose sleeplessly sleeping presence fills the house like a fog. In these latter days no one in the house dares speak

above a murmur, though the doctors blandly insist that nothing any longer passes beyond the portals of Pa's hearing—but how can they be so certain, Adam would like to know, where do they get such assurance? His father is in another kingdom now, far-off to be sure, but may it not be that news from the old realm reaches him still?

'Why are you up so early?' Petra asks accusingly. 'You never get up this early.'

'The time of year,' Adam says, 'these short nights—I can't sleep.'

This answer she receives in silence, sullenly. It is she who is supposed to be the sleepless one. Her unsleepingness, like their father's gradual dying, is a pervasive pressure that makes the atmosphere in the house feel as dense as the air inside a balloon.

'Is the Dead Horse coming down today?' he asks her.

She gives a shrug that is more a twitch. 'He said he would. I suppose he will.'

They can get no more from this topic and are silent again. He has that feeling of helpless exasperation his sister so often provokes in him. She stands as she always does, half turned away, at once expectant and cowering, as if longing to be embraced and at the same time in dread of it. When she was little she had no tickles and would squirm away from him with a scowl but then would lean back again, droopingly, unable to help herself, her sharp, narrow shoulders indrawn like folded wings and her head held to one side, seeming miserably to invite him to try again to make her squeal. How thin she had been, how thin and bony, like a sack half filled with sticks,

and still is. Now she lifts a hand and scratches her scalp vigorously, making a sandpapery sound.

Adam feels light-headed, weightless, seeming to float an inch above the floor. He supposes it is to do with the supply of oxygen to the brain, or lack of it. His sister is right, he is not used to being up at this hour—*everything is different*—when the world looks like an imitation of itself, cunningly crafted yet discrepant in small but essential details. He thinks of Helen his wife asleep up in the room that used to be his when he was a boy. Stretched beside her rigid and wakeful in the pre-dawn dusk he had wanted to rouse her but had not had the heart, so soundly was she sleeping. He might go up now and lie down again on the too-narrow bed and close her to him, but something that is a sort of shyness, a sort of fear, even, holds him back.

Good thing, by the way, that this young husband does not know what my doughty Dad, the godhead himself, was doing to his darling wife up in that bedroom not an hour since in what she will imagine is a dream.

On the subject of fathers: Adam has not seen his yet. When they arrived last night he pleaded his and Helen's weariness after the journey and said they would go straight to bed. He thought that to visit the old man then would have been gruesome; he would have felt like a body-snatcher measuring up a fresh specimen, or a vampire-hunter breaking into a crypt. Although he has not told her so he thinks his mother should not have insisted on taking Pa out of the hospital. Bringing him home to die is a throwback, something Granny Godley would have

approved. Yet this morning he is sorry that he did not go at once and at least look at him, his fallen father, for with each hour that passes it will be so much the harder to force himself up those stairs and into that sickroom. He does not know how he will behave at the side of what everyone, without saying so, has acknowledged is his father's deathbed. He has never been at a death before and hopes not to have to be present for this one.

Petra is still scratching, but with decreasing momentum, absently, like a cat slowly losing interest in its itch. He wishes he could help her, could assuage even one of her sore, inflamed spots. Yet he resents her, too, has always resented her, since before she was born, even, his usurper. He has a sudden clear memory of her as a baby in her cot, wrapped tight in a blanket, like a mummified yet all too living infanta. 'Oho, my bucko, she'll make you hop,' Granny Godley would say with a cackle, '—you'll think your arse is haunted!'

'Come on,' he says now brusquely to the girl, 'come on, and we'll have our breakfast.'

And sister and brother, these waifs, shuffle off into the shadows.

It is shadowed too up in the Sky Room where Adam Godley at the centre of a vast stillness is going about his dying. Yes, he too is Adam, like his son. By the way, apropos names and the like, I suppose I should before going further give some small account of myself, this voice speaking out of the void. Men have made me

variously keeper of the dawn, of twilight and the wind, have called me Argeiphantes, he who makes clear the sky, and Logios, the sweet-tongued one, have dubbed me trickster, the patron of gamblers and all manner of mountebanks, have appointed me the guardian of crossroads, protector of travellers, have conferred on me the grave title Psychopompos, usher of the freed souls of men to Pluto's netherworld. For I am Hermes, son of old Zeus and Maia the cavewoman.

You don't say, you say.

I understand your scepticism. Why in such times as these would the gods come back to be among men? But the fact is we never left—you only stopped entertaining us. For how should we leave, we who cannot but be everywhere? We merely made it seem that we had withdrawn, for a decent interval, as if to say we know when we are not wanted. All the same, we cannot resist revealing ourselves to you once in a while, out of our incurable boredom, or love of mischief, or that lingering nostalgia we harbour for this rough world of our making—I mean this particular one, for of course there is an infinity of others just like it that we made and must keep ever vigilantly in our care. When on a summer's day a sudden gale tears through the treetops, or when out of the blue a soft rain falls like the fall of grace upon a painted saint, there one of us is passing by; when the earth buckles and opens its maw to eat cities whole, when the sea rises up and swallows an entire archipelago with its palms and straw huts and a myriad ululating natives, be assured that one of our number is seriously annoyed.