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

“What’s wrong with it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, then.”

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

“What would a psychologist want with a nursery?”

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

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

“All right, let’s have a look.”

They walked down the hall of their HappyLife Home, which had cost them thirty thousand dollars with everything included. This house which clothed and fed and rocked them to sleep and played and sang and was good to them. Their approach was sensed by a hidden switch and the nursery light turned on when they came within ten feet of it. Similarly, behind them, in the halls, lights went on and off automatically as they left them behind.

“Well,” said George Hadley. They stood on the grass-like floor of the nursery. It was forty feet across by forty feet long and thirty feet high; it had cost half again as much as the rest of the house.

“But nothing’s too good for our children,” George had said.

The room was silent and empty. The walls were white and two dimensional. Now, as George and Lydia Hadley stood in the center of the room, the walls made a quiet noise and seemed to fall away into the distance. Soon an African veldt appeared, in three dimensions, on all sides, in color. It looked real to the

smallest stone and bit of yellow summer grass. The ceiling above them became a deep sky with a hot yellow sun.

George Hadley started to sweat from the heat. “Let’s get out of this sun,” he said. “This is a little too real. But I don’t see anything wrong.”

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

Now hidden machines were beginning to blow a wind containing prepared smells toward the two people in the middle of the baked veldt. The hot straw smell of lion grass, the cool green smell of the hidden water hole, the strong dried blood smell of the animals, the smell of dust like red pepper in the hot air. And now the sounds: the thump of distant antelope feet on soft grassy ground, the papery rustle of vultures. A shadow passed through the sky. George Hadley looked up, and as he watched the shadow moved across his sweating face. “Horrible creatures,” he heard his wife say.

“The vultures.”

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

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

“Some animal.” George Hadley put his hand above his eyes to block off the burning light and looked carefully. “A zebra or a baby giraffe, maybe.”

“Are you sure?” His wife sounded strangely nervous.

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

“Did you hear that scream?” she asked.

“No.”

“About a minute ago?”

“Sorry, no.”

The lions were coming. And again George Hadley was filled with respect for the brilliant mind that had come up with the idea for this room. A wonder of efficiency selling for an unbelievably low price. Every home should have one. Oh, occasionally they frightened you with their realism, they made you jump, gave you a scare. But most of the time they were fun for everyone. Not only your own son and daughter, but for yourself when you felt like a quick trip to a foreign land, a quick change of scenery. Well, here it was!

And here were the lions now, fifteen feet away. They looked so real, so powerful and shockingly real, that you could feel the hairs stand up on the back of your neck. Your mouth was filled with the dusty smell of their heated fur. The yellow of the lions and the summer grass was in your eyes like a picture in an expensive French wall hanging. And there was the sound of the lions quick, heavy breaths in the silent mid-day sun, and the smell of meat from their dripping mouths.

The lions stood looking at George and Lydia Hadley with terrible green-yellow eyes. “Watch out!” screamed Lydia.

The lions came running at them. Lydia turned suddenly and ran. Without thinking, George ran after her. Outside in the hall, after they had closed the door quickly and noisily behind them, he was laughing and she was crying. And they both stood shocked at the other’s reaction.

“George!”

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

“They almost got us!”

“Walls, Lydia, remember; glass walls, that’s all they are. Oh, they look real, I must admit–Africa in your living room. But it’s all created from three dimensional color film behind glass screens. And the machines that deliver the smells and sounds to go with the scenery. Here’s my handkerchief.”

“I’m afraid.” She came to him and put her body against him and cried as he held her. “Did you see?

Did you feel? It's too real."

"Now, Lydia..."

"You've got to tell Wendy and Peter not to read any more on Africa."

"Of course–of course." He patted her.

"Promise?"

"Sure."

"And lock the nursery for a few days until I can get over this."

"You know how difficult Peter is about that. When I punished him a month ago by locking it for even a few hours–the way he lost his temper! And Wendy too. They live for the nursery."

"It's got to be locked, that's all there is to it."

"All right." Although he wasn't happy about it, he locked the huge door. "You've been working too hard. You need a rest."

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

"You mean you want to fry my eggs for me?"

"Yes." She nodded.

"And mend my socks?"

"Yes." She nodded again excitedly, with tears in her eyes.

"And clean the house?"

"Yes, yes–oh, yes!"

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

“That’s just it. I feel like I don’t belong here. The house is wife and mother now, and nurse for the children. Can I compete with an African veldt? Can I give a bath and clean the children as efficiently or quickly as the automatic body wash can? I cannot. And it isn’t just me. It’s you.

You’ve been awfully nervous lately.”

“I suppose I have been smoking too much.”

“You look as if you didn’t know what to do with yourself in this house, either. You smoke a little more every morning and drink a little more every afternoon, and you are taking more pills to help you sleep at night. You’re beginning to feel unnecessary too.”

“Am I?” He thought for a moment as he and tried to feel into himself to see what was really there.

“Oh, George!” She looked past him, at the nursery door. “Those lions can’t get out of there, can they?”

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

“Of course not,” he said.

At dinner they ate alone, for Wendy and Peter were at a special plastic fair across town. They had called home earlier to say they’d be late. So George Hadley, deep in thought, sat watching the dining-room table produce warm dishes of food from the machines inside.

“We forgot the tomato sauce,” he said.

“Sorry,” said a small voice within the table, and tomato sauce appeared.

As for the nursery, thought George Hadley, it won’t hurt for the children to be locked out of it a while. Too much of anything isn’t good for anyone. And it

was clearly indicated that the children had been spending a little too much time on Africa. That sun. He could still feel it on his neck, like a hot paw. And the lions. And the smell of blood. Remarkable how the nursery read the thoughts in the children's minds and created life to fill their every desire. The children thought lions, and there were lions. The children thought zebras, and there were zebras. Sun–sun. Giraffes–giraffes. Death and death.

That last. He ate the meat that the table had cut for him without tasting it. Death thoughts. They were awfully young, Wendy and Peter, for death thoughts. Or, no, you were never too young, really.

Long before you knew what death was you were wishing it on someone else. When you were two years old you were shooting people with toy guns.

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

"Where are you going?"

George didn't answer Lydia… he was too busy thinking of something else. He let the lights shine softly on ahead of him, turn off behind him as he walked quietly to the nursery door. He listened against it. Far away, a lion roared. He unlocked the door and opened it. Just before he stepped inside, he heard a faraway scream. And then another roar from the lions, which died down quickly.

He stepped into Africa.

How many times in the last year had he opened this door and found Wonderland with Alice and the Mock Turtle, or Aladdin and his Magical Lamp, or Jack Pumpkinhead of Oz, or Dr. Doolittle, or the cow jumping over a very real-looking moon. All the most enjoyable creations of an imaginary world. How often had he seen Pegasus the winged horse flying in the sky ceiling, or seen explosions of red fireworks, or heard beautiful singing.

But now, is yellow hot Africa, this bake oven with murder in the heat. Perhaps Lydia was right.

Perhaps they needed a little vacation from the fantasy which was growing a bit too real for ten-yearold children. It was all right to exercise one's mind with unusual fantasies, but when the lively child mind settled on one pattern..?

It seemed that, at a distance, for the past month, he had heard lions roaring, and noticed their strong smell which carried as far away as his study door. But, being busy, he had paid it no attention.

George Hadley stood on the African veldt alone. The lions looked up from their feeding, watching him. The only thing wrong with the image was the open door. Through it he could see his wife, far down the dark hall, like a framed picture. She was still eating her dinner, but her mind was clearly on other things.

"Go away," he said to the lions.

They did not go. He knew exactly how the room should work. You sent out your thoughts.

Whatever you thought would appear. "Let's have Aladdin and his lamp," he said angrily. The veldt remained; the lions remained.

"Come on, room! I demand Aladdin!" he said.

Nothing happened. The lions made soft low noises in the hot sun.

"Aladdin!"

He went back to dinner. "The fool room's out of order," he said. "It won't change."

"Or..."

"Or what?"

"Or it can't change," said Lydia, "because the children have thought about Africa and lions and killing so many days that the room's stuck in a pattern it can't get out of."

“Could be.”

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

“Set it?”

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

“Peter doesn’t know machinery.”

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

“But…”

“Hello, Mom. Hello, Dad.”

The Hadleys turned. Wendy and Peter were coming happily in the front door, with bright blue eyes and a smell of fresh air on their clothes from their trip in the helicopter.

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

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

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

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

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

“I don’t understand,” said Peter.

“Your mother and I were just traveling through Africa.

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

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

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

“No.”

“Run see and come tell.”

She did as he told her.

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

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

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

“I’m sure you’re mistaken, Father.”

“I’m not, Peter. Come along now.”

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

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

There was a green, lovely forest, a lovely river, a purple mountain, high voices singing. And there was Rima the bird girl, lovely and mysterious. She was hiding in the trees with colorful butterflies, like flowers coming to life, flying about her long hair. The African veldt was gone. The lions were gone. Only Rima was here now, singing a song so beautiful that it brought tears to your eyes.

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

They opened their mouths.

“You heard me,” he said.

They went off to the air tube, where a wind blew them like brown leaves up to their sleeping rooms.

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

“What is that?” she asked.

“An old wallet of mine,” he said. He showed it to her. The smell of hot grass was on it… and the smell of a lion. It was wet from being in the lion’s mouth, there were tooth marks on it, and there was dried blood on both sides. He closed the door and locked it, tight.

They went to up to bed but couldn’t sleep. “Do you think Wendy changed it?” she said at last, in the dark room.

“Of course.”

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

“Yes.”

“Why?”

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

“How did your wallet get there?”

“I don’t know anything,” he said, “except that I’m beginning to be sorry we bought that room for the children. If children are suffering from any kind of emotional problem, a room like that…”

“It’s supposed to help them work off their emotional problems in a healthy way.”

“I’m starting to wonder.” His eyes were wide open, looking up at the ceiling.

“We’ve given the children everything they ever wanted. Is this our reward–secrecy, not doing what we tell them?”

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

“They’ve been acting funny ever since you wouldn’t let them go to New York a few months ago.”

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

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

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

“But it’s not Africa now, it’s South America and Rima.”

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

A moment later they heard the screams. Two screams. Two people screaming from downstairs. And then a roar of lions.

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

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

“Those screams–they sound familiar.”

“Do they?”

“Yes, awfully.”

And although their beds tried very hard, the two adults couldn’t be rocked to sleep for another hour.

A smell of cats was in the night air.

“Father?” asked Peter the next morning.

“Yes.”

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

“That all depends.”

“On what?” said Peter sharply.

“On you and your sister. If you break up this Africa with a little variety–oh, Sweden perhaps, or Denmark or China…”

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

“You are, within reasonable limits.”

“What’s wrong with Africa, Father?”

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

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

“Matter of fact, we’re thinking of turning the whole house off for about a month. Live sort of a happy family existence.”

“That sounds terrible! Would I have to tie my own shoes instead of letting the machine do it? And brush my own teeth and comb my hair and give myself a bath?”

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

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

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

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

“All right, go play in Africa.”

“Will you shut off the house sometime soon?”

“We’re considering it.”

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

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

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

“Am I on time?” said David McClean.

“Breakfast?” asked George Hadley.

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

“David, you’re a psychologist.”

“I should hope so.”

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

“Can’t say I did; the usual violences, a tendency toward a slight paranoia here or there. But this is usual in children because they feel their parents are always doing things to make them suffer in one way or another. But, oh, really nothing.”

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

There was a terrible screaming from the nursery.

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

They walked in on the children without knocking. The screams had stopped. The lions were feeding.

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

With the children gone, the two men stood studying the lions sitting together in the distance, eating with great enjoyment whatever it was they had caught.

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

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

“A little over a month.”

“It certainly doesn’t feel good.”

“I want facts, not feelings.”

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

“Is it that bad?”

“I’m afraid so. One of the original uses of these rooms was so that we could study the patterns left on the walls by the child’s mind. We could study them whenever we wanted to, and help the child.

In this case, however, the room has become a means of creating destructive thoughts, instead of helping to make them go away.”

“Didn’t you sense this before?”

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

“I wouldn’t let them go to New York.”

“What else?”

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

“Ah, ha!”

“Does that mean anything?”

“Everything. Where before they had a Santa Claus now they have a Scrooge. Children prefer Santa. You’ve let this room and this house replace you and your wife in your children’s feelings. This room is their mother and father, far more important in their lives than their real parents. And now you come along and want to shut it off. No wonder there’s hatred here. You can feel it coming out of the sky. Feel that sun. George, you’ll have to change your life. Like too many others, you’ve built it around creature comforts. Why, you’d go hungry tomorrow if something went wrong in your kitchen. You wouldn’t know how to cook an egg. All the same, turn everything off. Start new. It’ll take time. But we’ll make good children out of bad in a year, wait and see.”

“But won’t the shock be too much for the children, shutting the room up without notice, for good?”

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

The lions were finished with their bloody meat. They were standing on the edge of the clearing watching the two men.

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

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

“What?”

“…that they could become real?”

“Not that I know.”

“Some problem with the machinery, someone changing something inside?”

“No.”

They went to the door.

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

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

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

“Paranoia is thick around here today,” said David McClean. “You can see it everywhere. Hello.” He bent and picked up a bloody scarf. “This yours?”

“No.” George Hadley’s face set like stone. “It belongs to Lydia.”

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

The two children were so upset that they couldn’t control themselves. They screamed and danced around and threw things. They shouted and cried and called them rude names and jumped on the furniture.

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

“Now, children.”

The children threw themselves onto a sofa, crying.

“George,” said Lydia Hadley, “turn it on again, just for a few moments. You need to give them some more time.”

“No.”

“You can’t be so cruel…”

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

And he marched about the house turning off the voice clocks, the stoves, the heaters, the shoe cleaners, the body washer, the massager, and every other machine he could put his hand to.

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

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

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

“Saying things like that won’t get you anywhere.”

“I wish you were dead!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

And the three of them went off talking excitedly while he let himself be transported upstairs through the air tube and set about dressing himself. A minute later Lydia appeared.

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

“Did you leave them in the nursery?”

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

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

“Pride, money, foolishness.”

“I think we’d better get downstairs before those kids spend too much time with those damned beasts again.”

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

They went downstairs in the air tube and ran down the hall. The children were nowhere in sight. “Wendy? Peter!”

They ran into the nursery. The veldt was empty save for the lions waiting, looking at them. “Peter, Wendy?”

The door closed loudly.

“Wendy, Peter!”

George Hadley and his wife turned quickly and ran back to the door.

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

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

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

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

Mr. and Mrs. George Hadley beat at the door. “Now, don’t be silly, children. It’s time to go. Mr. McClean’ll be here in a minute and…”

And then they heard the sounds.

The lions were on three sides of them in the yellow veldt grass. They walked quietly through the dry grass, making long, deep rolling sounds in their throats. The lions!

Mr. Hadley looked at his wife and they turned and looked back at the beasts edging slowly forward, knees bent, tails in the air.

Mr. and Mrs. Hadley screamed.

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

“Well, here I am,” said David McClean from the nursery door. “Oh, hello.” He looked carefully at the two children seated in the center of the room eating a little picnic lunch. Beyond them he could see the water hole and the yellow veldt. Above was the hot sun. He began to sweat. “Where are your father and mother?”

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

“Good, we must get going.”

At a distance Mr. McClean saw the lions fighting over something and then quietening down to feed in silence under the shady trees. He put his hand to his eyes to block out the sun and looked at them.

Now the lions were done feeding. They moved to the water hole to drink. A shadow moved over Mr. McClean's hot face. Many shadows moved. The vultures were dropping down from the burning sky.

"A cup of tea?" asked Wendy in the silence.