**The Ones who walk away from Omelas**

With a clamor of bells that set the swallows soaring, the Festival of Summer came to the

city Omelas, bright-towered by the sea. The rigging of the boats in harbor sparkled with flags. In

the streets between houses with red roofs and painted walls, between old moss-grown gardens

and under avenues of trees, past great parks and public buildings, processions moved. Some were

decorous: old people in long stiff robes of mauve and grey, grave master workmen, quiet, merry

women carrying their babies and chatting as they walked. In other streets the music beat faster, a

shimmering of gong and tambourine, and the people went dancing, the procession was a dance.

Children dodged in and out, their high calls rising like the swallows' crossing flights, over the

music and the singing. All the processions wound towards the north side of the city, where on the

great water-meadow called the Green' Fields boys and girls, naked in the bright air, with mudstained

feet and ankles and long, lithe arms, exercised their restive horses before the race. The

horses wore no gear at all but a halter with

Omelas sounds in my words like a city in a fairy tale, long ago and far away, once upon a time.

Perhaps it would be best if you imagined it as your own fancy bids, assuming it will rise to the

occasion, for certainly I cannot suit you all. For instance, how about technology? I think that

there would be no cars or helicopters in and above the streets; this follows from the fact that the

people of Omelas are happy people. Happiness is based on a just discrimination of what is

necessary, what is neither necessary nor destructive, and what is destructive. In the middle

category, however – that of the unnecessary but undestructive, that of comfort, luxury,

exuberance, etc. -- they could perfectly well have central heating, subway trains,. washing

machines, and all kinds of marvelous devices not yet invented here, floating light-sources,

fuelless power, a cure for the common cold. Or they could have none of that: it doesn't matter.

As you like it. I incline to think that people from towns up and down the coast have been coming

in to Omelas during the last days before the Festival on very fast little trains and double-decked

trams, and that the train station of Omelas is actually the handsomest building in town, though

plainer than the magnificent Farmers' Market. But even granted trains, I fear that Omelas so far

strikes some of you as goody-goody. Smiles, bells, parades, horses, bleh. If so, please add an

orgy. If an orgy would help, don't hesitate. Let us not, however, have temples from which issue

beautiful nude priests and priestesses already half in ecstasy and ready to copulate with any man

or woman, lover or stranger who desires union with the deep godhead of the blood, although that

was my first idea. But really it would be better not to have any temples in Omelas – at least, not

manned temples. Religion yes, clergy no. Surely the beautiful nudes can just wander about,

offering themselves like divine souffles to the hunger of the needy and the rapture of the flesh.

Let them join the processions. Let tambourines be struck above the copulations, and the glory of

desire be proclaimed upon the gongs, and (a not unimportant point) let the offspring of these

delightful rituals be beloved and looked after by all. One thing I know there is none of in Omelas

is guilt. But what else should there be? I thought at first there were no drugs, but that is

puritanical. For those who like it, the faint insistent sweetness of drooz may perfume the ways of

the city, drooz which first brings a great lightness and brilliance to the mind and limbs, and then

after some hours a dreamy languor, and wonderful visions at last of the very arcana and inmost

secrets of the Universe, as well as exciting the pleasure of sex beyond all belief; and it is not

habit-forming. For more modest tastes I think there ought to be beer. What else, what else

belongs in the joyous city? The sense of victory, surely, the celebration of courage. But as we did

without clergy, let us do without soldiers. The joy built upon successful slaughter is not the right

kind of joy; it will not do; it is fearful and it is trivial. A boundless and generous contentment, a

magnanimous triumph felt not against some outer enemy but in communion with the finest and

fairest in the souls of all men everywhere and the splendor of the world's summer; this is what

swells the hearts of the people of Omelas, and the victory they celebrate is that of life. I really

don't think many of them need to take drooz.

Most of the processions have reached the Green Fields by now. A marvelous smell of

cooking goes forth from the red and blue tents of the provisioners. The faces of small children

are amiably sticky; in the benign grey beard of a man a couple of crumbs of rich pastry are

entangled. The youths and girls have mounted their horses and are beginning to group around the

starting line of the course. An old woman, small, fat, and laughing, is passing out flowers from a

basket, and tall young men, wear her flowers in their shining hair. A child of nine or ten sits at

the edge of the crowd, alone, playing on a wooden flute. People pause to listen, and they smile,

but they do not speak to him, for he never ceases playing and never sees them, his dark eyes

wholly rapt in the sweet, thin magic of the tune.

He finishes, and slowly lowers his hands holding the wooden flute.

As if that little private silence were the signal, all at once a trumpet sounds from the

pavilion near the starting line: imperious, melancholy, piercing. The horses rear on their slender

legs, and some of them neigh in answer. Sober-faced, the young riders stroke the horses' necks

and soothe them, whispering, "Quiet, quiet, there my beauty, my hope. . . ." They begin to form

in rank along the starting line. The crowds along the racecourse are like a field of grass and

flowers in the wind. The Festival of Summer has begun.

Do you believe? Do you accept the festival, the city, the joy? No? Then let me describe

one more thing.

In a basement under one of the beautiful public buildings of Omelas, or perhaps in the

cellar of one of its spacious private homes, there is a room. It has one locked door, and no

window. A little light seeps in dustily between cracks in the boards, secondhand from a

cobwebbed window somewhere across the cellar. In one corner of the little room a couple of

mops, with stiff, clotted, foul-smelling heads, stand near a rusty bucket. The floor is dirt, a little

damp to the touch, as cellar dirt usually is. The room is about three paces long and two wide: a

mere broom closet or disused tool room. In the room a child is sitting. It could be a boy or a girl.

It looks about six, but actually is nearly ten. It is feeble-minded. Perhaps it was born defective or

perhaps it has become imbecile through fear, malnutrition, and neglect. It picks its nose and

occasionally fumbles vaguely with its toes or genitals, as it sits haunched in the corner farthest

from the bucket and the two mops. It is afraid of the mops. It finds them horrible. It shuts its

eyes, but it knows the mops are still standing there; and the door is locked; and nobody will

come. The door is always locked; and nobody ever comes, except that sometimes-the child has

no understanding of time or interval – sometimes the door rattles terribly and opens, and a

person, or several people, are there. One of them may come and kick the child to make it stand

up. The others never come close, but peer in at it with frightened, disgusted eyes. The food bowl

and the water jug are hastily filled, the door is locked, the eyes disappear. The people at the door

never say anything, but the child, who has not always lived in the tool room, and can remember

sunlight and its mother's voice, sometimes speaks. "I will be good," it says. "Please let me out. I

will be good!" They never answer. The child used to scream for help at night, and cry a good

deal, but now it only makes a kind of whining, "eh-haa, eh-haa," and it speaks less and less often.

It is so thin there are no calves to its legs; its belly protrudes; it lives on a half-bowl of corn meal

and grease a day. It is naked. Its buttocks and thighs are a mass of festered sores, as it sits in its

own excrement continually.

They all know it is there, all the people of Omelas. Some of them have come to see it,

others are content merely to know it is there. They all know that it has to be there. Some of them

understand why, and some do not, but they all understand that their happiness, the beauty of their

city, the tenderness of their friendships, the health of their children, the wisdom of their scholars,

the skill of their makers, even the abundance of their harvest and the kindly weathers of their

skies, depend wholly on this child's abominable misery.

This is usually explained to children when they are between eight and twelve, whenever

they seem capable of understanding; and most of those who come to see the child are young

people, though often enough an adult comes, or comes back, to see the child. No matter how well

the matter has been explained to them, these young spectators are always shocked and sickened

at the sight. They feel disgust, which they had thought themselves superior to. They feel anger,

outrage, impotence, despite all the explanations. They would like to do something for the child.

But there is nothing they can do. If the child were brought up into the sunlight out of that vile

place, if it were cleaned and fed and comforted, that would be a good thing, indeed; but if it were

done, in that day and hour all the prosperity and beauty and delight of Omelas would wither and

be destroyed. Those are the terms. To exchange all the goodness and grace of every life in

Omelas for that single, small improvement: to throw away the happiness of thousands for the

chance of the happiness of one: that would be to let guilt within the walls indeed.

The terms are strict and absolute; there may not even be a kind word spoken to the child.

Often the young people go home in tears, or in a tearless rage, when they have seen the

child and faced this terrible paradox. They may brood over it for weeks or years. But as time

goes on they begin to realize that even if the child could be released, it would not get much good

of its freedom: a little vague pleasure of warmth and food, no doubt, but little more. It is too

degraded and imbecile to know any real joy. It has been afraid too long ever to be free of fear. Its

habits are too uncouth for it to respond to humane treatment. Indeed, after so long it would

probably be wretched without walls about it to protect it, and darkness for its eyes, and its own

excrement to sit in. Their tears at the bitter injustice dry when they begin to perceive the terrible

justice of reality, and to accept it. Yet it is their tears and anger, the trying of their generosity and

the acceptance of their helplessness, which are perhaps the true source of the splendor of their

lives. Theirs is no vapid, irresponsible happiness. They know that they, like the child, are not

free. They know compassion. It is the existence of the child, and their knowledge of its existence,

that makes possible the nobility of their architecture, the poignancy of their music, the profundity

of their science. It is because of the child that they are so gentle with children. They know that if

the wretched one were not there snivelling in the dark, the other one, the flute-player, could

make no joyful music as the young riders line up in their beauty for the race in the sunlight of the

first morning of summer.

Now do you believe in them? Are they not more credible? But there is one more thing to

tell, and this is quite incredible.

At times one of the adolescent girls or boys who go to see the child does not go home to

weep or rage, does not, in fact, go home at all. Sometimes also a man or woman much older falls

silent for a day or two, and then leaves home. These people go out into the street, and walk down

the street alone. They keep walking, and walk straight out of the city of Omelas, through the

beautiful gates. They keep walking across the farmlands of Omelas. Each one goes alone, youth

or girl man or woman. Night falls; the traveler must pass down village streets, between the

houses with yellow-lit windows, and on out into the darkness of the fields. Each alone, they go

west or north, towards the mountains. They go on. They leave Omelas, they walk ahead into the

darkness, and they do not come back. The place they go towards is a place even less imaginable

to most of us than the city of happiness. I cannot describe it at all. It is possible that it does not

exist. But they seem to know where they are going, the ones who walk away from Omelas.