

The Veldt – Intermediate Level Story

“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-year-old 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?”