

The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas

By: Ursula K. LeGuin

With a clamor of bells that set the swallows soaring, the Festival of Summer came to the city of Omelas, bright towered by the sea. The rigging of the boats in the 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, quiet, merry women carrying their babies and chatting as they walked. In other streets the music beat faster and the people were dancing. Children ran in and out, and boys and girls exercised their horses, getting them ready for the races. In the silence of the broad green meadow, one could hear the music winding through the city streets... a cheerful faint sweetness of the air that from time to time trembled and gathered together and broke out in the great joyous clanging of the bells. *1

Joyous! How is one to tell about joy? How to describe the citizens of Omelas? They were not simple folk, you see, though they *were* happy. But we do not say words of cheer anymore. All smiles have become old. Given a description such as this one tends to make you have certain assumptions. Given a description such as this one tends to make you look for the King, mounted on a great stallion, leading the processions of dancers and citizens of Omelas. But there was no King. They did not use swords or keep slaves in Omelas. They were not barbarians. I do not know the rules or laws of their society, but I suspect there were only a few. As they did without a King and without slavery, they also did without the stock exchange, the secret police, and bombs. Yet I repeat these **WERE NOT** simple folk. They were **not** less complex than us. The trouble is that we have a bad habit, encouraged by scholars and philosophers, as considering happiness as a something rather stupid. Only pain is intellectual, only evil is interesting. This is the sin of the artist: a refusal to admit that evil is dull and pain is boring. *2

How can I tell you about the people of Omelas? They were not naïve and happy children, though *their* children were. They were mature, intelligent, passionate adults whose lives were not horrible. O Miracle! But I wish I could describe it better to you. I wish I could convince you! 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 however you want to... for certainly I cannot describe well enough to suit you all. For instance, how about technology? I think that there would be no cars or helicopters in and above the streets of Omelas. Happiness is based on a just discrimination of what is necessary... and in Omelas, cars and helicopters was just not necessary. The people of Omelas could have had central heating and air, subway trains, washing machines, and all kinds of marvelous devices not yet invented here like

floating light sources and the cure for the common cold... or they could have had none of that. It doesn't really matter. As you like it. Imagine it as you will. *3

One thing I know there was none of in Omelas is guilt. But what else should there be? I thought at first there were no drugs there, but that is naïve of me to think. What else? What else belongs in this joyous city? The sense of victory! The celebration of courage! There are no soldiers, therefore there is no war. Victory caused by death is **not** the right kind of joy. Being content, and in communion with everyone is what brings joy to the hearts of the people of Omelas. The victory they celebrate is life! *4

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 cooks. The faces of small children are sticky, and in the grey beards of the elderly a couple of cupcakes crumbs are entangled. The youths and girls have mounted their horses and are beginning to group around the starting line of the race. An old woman, small, fat and laughing, is passing out flowers from a basket. 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 a wooden flute. People pause to listen, and they smile, but they do not speak to him, for he never stops playing and never sees them. He is so lost in his music, the sweet, thin magic of the tune. He finishes, and slowly lowers the 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 calmly 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 race course are like a field of grass and flowers in the wind. The Festival of Summer has begun. *5

Do you believe? Do you accept the festival, the city, the joy? No? Then let me describe one more thing.

In the basement under one of the beautiful public buildings of Omelas, there is a room. It has one locked door, and no window. A little light seeps in dustily between the 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 feet long and two feet wide: a mere broom closet of a disused tool room. *6

In the room a child is sitting. It could be a boy or a girl. It looks about six years old, but actually it is near ten. It is feeble-minded and slow. 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. It sits hunched 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 no one will come. *7

The door is always locked and nobody ever comes, except that sometimes- the child has no understanding of time- sometimes the door rattles terribly... and opens, and a person (or several people) are standing there. One of them may come in 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 just are hastily filled, and 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 closet, and can remember sunlight and his mother's voice, sometimes says, "I will be good." It says, "Please let me out. I will be good." They never answer it. The child used to scream for help at night, and cry a lot. But now it only makes a sort of whining, "eh-haa, eh-haaaaaa," 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. *8

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 is **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 kindly weathers of their skies depend wholly on this child's horrid misery. *9

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 and outrage despite all the explanations. They would like to do something for the child. But there is nothing they can do.

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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 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 definitely let guilt within the walls of Omelas. *11

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 times 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 dumb to know any real joy. It has been afraid too long ever to be free of fear. Its habits are too barbaric for it to respond to normal human

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. *12

The peoples' tears at the injustice dry when they begin to perceive the terrible justice of reality, and to accept helplessness, which are perhaps the true source of splendor in their lives. 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 their elaborate buildings and mansions, the magic of their music, the greatness 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 suffering in the dark, the other one, the flute-payer, could make no joyful music as the young riders line up their horses for the race. *13

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. *14