

Why Don't We Just Kill the Kid In the Omelas Hole Isabel J. Kim

 clarkesworldmagazine.com/kim_02_24

[Issue 209 – February 2024](#)

So they broke into the hole in the ground, and they killed the kid, and all the lights went out in Omelas: click, click, click. And the pipes burst and there was a sewage leak and the newscasters said there was a typhoon on the way, so they (a different “they,” these were the “they” in charge, the “they” who lived in the nice houses in Omelas [okay, every house in Omelas was a nice house, but these were Nice Houses]) got another kid and put it in the hole.

And the newscasters said the hurricane had dissipated into a tropical storm, and the pipes were repaired, and the well-paid janitors cleaned up the sewage leak while wearing proper PPE, and the kid in the hole cried and cried and cried. Or they (the general “they,” the “they” that meant you and me and the janitors and the newscasters) assumed that the kid was crying, because the hole was soundproofed so nobody could hear the kid, which didn’t stop them from knowing about the kid, but it sort of helped.

So they (the first “they”) killed the kid again. They stormed the hole and broke the kid out and slit the kid’s throat on public television (as all television in Omelas was publicly funded), and they said, “Look at what sort of shit your beautiful city is built on!” and the kid bled out and it was extremely graphic to the point of being censored in later broadcasts. And one of the tracks of the free public transit system twisted loose, and a bunch of commuters were killed in a freak accident, and the stock market started shuddering downward, and a house collapsed on the south side of Omelas.

So they (the “Nice Houses” they) got a third kid and stuck it in the hole. They felt weird about it, but they liked their Nice Houses, and also, they really did truly and wholeheartedly care about the well-being of Omelas and all of the citizens except for the kid in the hole. The newscasters talked about the second dead kid sorrowfully and the social media posters (every citizen in Omelas had a healthy and regular relationship with social media and not a bad and addictive one) talked about how this was a real tragedy because even though we knew that there was a kid in the hole, now that’s three times as many kids in the hole, and it’s extra sad because we usually don’t kill the kid in the hole, they usually die of old age or malnutrition.

None of this mattered to the living third kid in the hole, who was not enjoying the hole experience.

But nobody heard the third kid's sobbing because of the soundproofing, and also because now no one was allowed to go see the kid since security had been beefed up around the load-bearing suffering child to prevent its death and prolong its suffering. Which meant that the kid-killers had to seriously plan the next attempt, and everyone had time to decompress from the first two murders of the load-bearing suffering child, and also, the video of the second very graphic murder circulated outside of Omelas.

Everyone (me, you, the newscasters, the janitors with the good PPE, the children who lived inside and outside Omelas) was performatively disgusted by the video. Everyone watched it anyway. It went viral like a snuff film went viral or Kim Kardashian's first sex tape went viral, and it was like the load-bearing suffering child was in everyone's home at once, like there were a million load-bearing suffering children looking at you from a million screens.

Many non-Omelan people said a lot of very mean things (no one outside Omelas had a good and normal relationship with social media), like that the Omelans were monsters for letting the load-bearing suffering child exist and therefore everything about Omelas was fucked beyond belief, and had they known about the load-bearing suffering child, they never would have visited Omelas' beautiful beaches and nightclubs and festivals, because the knowledge of the child was so goddamn fucking horrific and tainted everything. And maybe it was the Omelans who should be killed.

This sentiment made the Omelans kind of upset. They pointed out that Omelas was a better place to live than most other places because at least you knew the load-bearing suffering child suffered for a reason, as opposed to all the other kids who were suffering for no reason. Out there, kids had their arms ripped off while they were working in chicken processing plants, kids were left in baby boxes, and kids lived in perfect quiet misery with one parent who was an alcoholic and another parent who beat them. In Omelas, there were only good parents and no child suffered except the single one who did. How dare you say shit about our fair city and our single child, when you won't even help your own.

What the Omelans didn't say was that their second grievance was due to the fact that the kid killers had broken the unspoken code: if you had a problem with the load-bearing suffering child, you were supposed to get the hell out of Omelas and keep it to yourself. You weren't supposed to kill the kid. As a teenager, you were supposed to learn the blunt truth that your society was built on a single ongoing act of senseless, meaningless cruelty, and then you were supposed to cry about it or rage about it, but either way you were supposed to get over it and grow up and get on with your fully-paid-for-by-the-state education system and your festivals and your legal weed and your *drooz*.

The kid was the drop of blood in the bowl of milk whose slight bitterness would make the sweetness of the rest of Omelas richer. Without the kid in the hole, Omelas was just paradise. With the load-bearing, suffering child, Omelas meant something.

And of course, it was true that the whole city literally ran on the load-bearing suffering child in a very real physical way that was not a metaphor. And everyone really liked having running power and no blackouts and good schools and low crime and community-oriented government and safe sidewalks and public transit that worked.

Things got really toxic online. Then the third kid was killed.

This time it was harder to say who the killers were, because the first they, the killers, had osmosed into the second they (the “they” of the Nice Houses), and also, the third they (the “they” who were the janitors with the good PPE equipment, and the newscasters). So it was never discovered who exactly slipped through all the protections and the soundproofing and the soldiers with tranquilizer guns (because there were no real guns in Omelas) and stole the kid from the hole and killed it in the conference room where the people with the Nice Houses met to talk about government.

There was no message this time because the dead kid on the table was the message. The dead kid had been dressed just like every other kid in Omelas (comfortable, affordable clothing of good quality, with adorable patterns), and it hadn’t been in the hole for long enough to develop the really horrific features that the kids in the hole always developed (open and weeping sores on their butts, skinny limbs and a protruding stomach, a sort of lank greasiness that permeated their entire being), and this third dead kid mostly just looked a little skinny, and grimy, and asleep.

There was an earthquake that cracked the west side and opened a sinkhole, and four cars were swallowed up in a freak accident. They talked about it on the news, alongside photos of the dead kid dressed up in the conference room. And because the Omelans all had very good educations where they learned about the literary meaning of symbols, they knew that the dead kid in pretty clothing was a reminder of the fact that the child in the hole was also an Omelan child.

The rest of the world, which had variable public education and overworked language arts teachers, freaked out on social media. The sentiment boiled down to: “If Omelas is a perfect city and has really good social services and there is ready access to birth control and easy ways for people with wombs to give up the infants they gestated to people that want them, and therefore all children are wanted and cared for by someone in Omelas, regardless of whether it is their biological progenitor, where do the Omelans get the load-bearing suffering child?”

And the follow-up freak-out: “Oh my god, they must be stealing our children.”

Of course, nothing in the freak-outs materially touched the Omelans, because Omelas was a shining city on a hill that could only be hurt when there was no load-bearing suffering child, and the dead child had been immediately replaced, so Omelas wasn’t assaulted by foreign troops, and there were no trade sanctions against it, and people didn’t stop going to its

beaches. But they had to do some media spin, and the Nice House Experiencers went on TV to reassure the world that the load-bearing suffering child was an ethically sourced, no one's son, and definitely an Omelan, and meanwhile some of the Nice House Experiencers privately spoke among each other.

"Look, maybe we shouldn't have a kid in the hole?" one of the Nice House Experiencers said. "Maybe the kid in the hole was always a bad idea."

"What's the other option?" the second Nice House Experience said. "Look me in the eye and tell me there is a better solution than putting one single kid in the hole, and letting that one single kid have a miserable life, in return for the good lives of all of our children?"

"What if they put your kid in?"

And the second Nice House Experiencer didn't have an answer for that. Because she knew in her heart of hearts that she would damn every last person in Omelas rather than subject her child to the hole.

"What *they*," she said instead. "How do I know you're not the one who killed the kid?"

This question was replicated in many rooms, during many meetings that escalated to shouting until at one point someone said: "Why are we arguing so much when the kid is in the hole? The kid is in the hole, which means that we shouldn't have so much infighting. What is the point of the kid in the hole if we can't even get our act together!"

That had many philosophical implications on whether disagreements can exist in paradise, but in reality, all of this bullshit only meant that the people with the Nice Houses were distracted enough that the fourth kid was killed easily, and without much fanfare.

And then there was an avalanche, a spread of religiously motivated homophobia, and an incidence of road rage with a tranquilizer gun that left four dead.

But they managed to catch the specific guy who had killed the fourth kid. They caught him on the newly installed CCTV cameras that did 'round the clock surveillance. They arrested him at his home, which was near the sinkhole.

The murderer surrendered peacefully. He was a very regular looking man. Nothing about him looked like a murderer or a dissident. He looked just like every other person who had benefited from Omelas' many social safety networks and had grown up without ever knowing suffering.

Before his execution, they (the people with the Nice Houses, as a proxy for the newscasters, as a proxy for everyone else) asked him why he was doing this. The murderer didn't shrug, because he was being held by a Kevlar straitjacket, which had been imported from outside.

"I'm personally doing it because I think we're all cowards here. We're all so fucking afraid of the potential of being the one to suffer that we put that damn kid in the hole and the kid suffers forever, and everyone is so fucking afraid of doing something that we pretend that we are living better lives without suffering. It's disgusting."

He spoke with the moral certainty of the classical Omelan who knew about suffering only abstractly and through the existence of the load-bearing suffering child.

"What are you trying to solve?" the executioner said. The executioner was the only one in the room, but she was relaying the questions from the Nice House Experiencers who had sourced the questions from a public questionnaire and had approved of every single one, because at the end of the day, admittedly, every person in Omelas lived in a Nice House.

"If we kill enough kids then you will eventually stop putting kids in the hole," the murderer said. "I'm an accelerationist."

"A lot of people died because you killed the kid."

"I'm sorry about that," the murderer said, and he sounded genuine. He sounded like he really cared about the well-being of all the Omelans and their susceptibility to freak accidents, but he cared about the one kid just a little more.

"How did it feel to kill?" the executioner said. This was not a question that was on the list. This was a question the executioner wanted to know for herself.

"Bad," he said. "But it's better than being locked in the hole for your entire life."

The executioner didn't say anything to that. She turned away from him to prepare the syringe and the chemicals.

"Before I'm dead, I'd like to say a few words," the murderer said to the executioner's back. "We will keep killing the kid in the hole. You are going to run out of kids before we stop killing the kids that go into the hole. Even if you kill me, now we all know about killing the load-bearing suffering child. You can't kill me in any way that matters. The kid will die again and again until you stop putting kids in the hole."

And he grinned a big white grin (they had really good dental care in Omelas that wasn't tied to a separate insurance) and was executed by painless lethal injection and so became the first person in Omelas (other than all the load-bearing suffering children) who Omelas, as a state, had killed, and Omelas became the sort of city that killed people using painless lethal injection.

But that was okay, because it happened during the period of time while the kid wasn't in the hole, so it was a fluke, the same way the typhoon was a fluke, the homophobia was a fluke, the Omelans being shithheads on social media was a fluke. It was something that could only

happen while Omelas wasn't *Omelas* and was instead just like every other city with no load-bearing suffering child and many load-bearing suffering adults.

The day after the lethal injection, the fifth kid was killed in the hole. And then the executioner walked out of Omelas, but no one paid attention to her leaving.

It turned out that the dead murderer had underestimated the Omelans, because things continued in this cyclical fashion for a while. Kids were put in a series of holes and were summarily killed. The deaths were reported on public television and were dissected badly on social media through a variety of angles.

Like: "This kid is a metaphor for the third world and for the slave labor that mines the rare metals that go into iPhones and for the boys who cross the border to work in the fields while they're underage and the girls who are sold into marriage to pedophiles."

Like: "This kid is a reincarnation of a Bodhisattva and is perfectly happy to experience suffering for the sake of her fellow man, so really it's like, totally fine that the kid is suffering."

Like: "Why do we care about this kid so much, it's just one kid?"

Like: "The kid is a SYMBOL of the LOWER CLASSES and how they SUFFER."

Like: "No, seriously, where does the kid come from? My mom says she saw a kid disappear off the train, that they're kidnapping kids off of public transit."

Like: "If we put a pulsating mass of tissue cultured from the cells of an Omelan child, and put that in the prison, would that have the same effect, in the same way that lab-grown-meat is still technically meat?"

By now everyone (except the newscasters) had stopped counting dead children, and nobody has any questions for the murderers anymore. The dead murderer was wrong. They haven't run out of children. But they haven't run out of murderers, either.

These days, Omelas is perfect except when it isn't, and every once in a while, Omelas has a series of natural disasters and freak accidents strike and everyone is a little afraid that their kid will be the next one in the hole. But only when the kid is dead and a new kid needs to be chosen.

A drop of blood, in a bowl of milk.

Omelas now has a really long Wikipedia entry, with a whole subarticle about the load-bearing suffering child, and a second subarticle about the children who died. They tell you about the children now, after they die. What their names are. They promise that the children are

ethically sourced. But there aren't any citations. And some people say that there isn't a kid in the hole anymore. They've moved the hole a bunch of times, and they don't let people know the location anymore. They have extra soundproofing.

Most days, Omelas is sunny and beautiful and nothing bad happens. And then there will be a day that is overcast and cloudy, and on that day, people die in circus accidents and carbon monoxide leaks and start harassment campaigns on twitter. And sometimes on that day people die through lethal injection. So it's clear that sometimes the kid is alive and suffering, and sometimes the kid has been killed and doesn't exist.

Or maybe there's no kid anymore, and Omelas is just like everywhere else: lucky until it isn't.

Occasionally a content creator will walk into Omelas and film a video while standing on one of the balconies of the Nice Houses or while sitting on one of Omelas' beautiful beaches. They will talk about the history of Omelas in the same way that people talk about the Uyghurs situation in China, the concentration camps of the Third Reich, the comfort women imported from Korea by Japan, the Belgian Congo, the Atlantic Slave Trade in relation to the American South, and the refugees who sink in ships off the coast of Western Europe.

And they (the ones who visit Omelas) say: Thank God we aren't dealing with that horrid wound in society. Thank God there is somewhere that shows us how fucking bad things could get. What a pit in the ground. What a fucked up little trolley problem. What a lesson for us. Thank God we don't live there. Thank God we know it exists.

Isabel J. Kim is a Korean-American speculative fiction writer based in New York City. She is a Shirley Jackson Award winner, an Astounding Award finalist, and her short fiction has been published in Clarkesworld, Lightspeed, and Strange Horizons, among other venues. When she's not writing, she's either practicing law or co-hosting her internet culture podcast Wow if True—both equally noble pursuits.