

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/2

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The Happy Island

Because the rich man will die within a year, he has come to the Happy Island to live. It was during the last month he read about this lost world. Amidst an opaque jungle this tribal island has the earth's happiest and longest-lived men.

"How long has the longest-lived person lived here?" He asks the island chief.

The reply comes in the number of moons.

The rich man calculates and it turns out to be around 160 years. It quickens the beatings of his 82-year-old heart. Another eighty! If he starts living here, he can get an unruffled life for another term? But that is the exception. Normally, people die on the island between the ages of 110 and 120, he learns.

The chief is 102 years of age. A few wrinkles around the mouth, a little salt-and-pepper hair, and the man claims to be 20-year older than the rich man? He looks with envy at the chief.

"How come you look younger than me?" He says.

The chief laughs aloud, revealing long yellowish teeth.

The rich man eyes the crowd around the bamboo bench where they sit. Men, women and children: naked. That is how the islanders live. They only wear grass skirts around their waist. Living natural is fine. The rich man can do that. But the fact is he is fat. His bare body would look awful in a short grass skirt.

"How old is that young lady?" the rich man asks, pointing to a girl wearing a fishbone necklace. The girl appears to be 15 or 16. Her peeled avocado skin is shining with short straight breasts. Her eye has the brightness of a sun-soaked sunflower. He is sure she can't be more than 20.

Laughter spills around. Why? The girl is over 30 and a mother of three.

The rich man stares at the woman. His breathless eyes forget to blink, breathe. As if he is no longer 82, but a 28-year-old lad. At that age he was a rising businessman and fond of falling for tantalising women.

"I would like to live here." He says he has enough money and wishes to purchase a big property. He curbs his desire from mentioning his ability to buy the whole island. In fact, in Brazil he has his own private island which came to him as a gift (he prefers not to call it a bribe). And the number of bank notes he has brought with him will certainly outnumber the total sunflowers of the island.

Purchase? Money? The chief doesn't understand. No one purchases anything here. And money? They do not know how it works. Here everyone is self-sufficient. He shows the rich man around his house.

The house is a dull den, a grass hut consists of narrow entering and low ceiling. In the fenced garden various vegetables are playing hide and seek among sunflower plants. And wandering everywhere are chicken,

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/2

goats, a few ducks. The chief says they also hunt in the woods. Boar mainly. But fish is their main food which is plentiful in the lagoon. So apart from fishing there are vegetables, fruits, meat and milk. What else could one need to survive?

“Well,” says the rich man. “I will hire a servant. I will have him do all the work for me.”

“Servant?” The chief frowns at him. “Here everyone works for everyone’s food. That’s the rule.”

The rich man reflects. He might manage to grow vegetables. He was born into a peasant family and worked on the family farm until he was 18. Then the week after he survived a snake bite he told his father that he hated the farmer’s life. He wanted to get educated; then good job, good money, good life...

“Son,” his father spoke in a trembling voice. “I know what you are after. But believe me this family farm is like heaven. You cultivate it. You live on it. Eat good food. Breathe fine air. Have a nice sleep. And you are happy. That’s all you need in life.”

He didn’t believe his father. He left the farm, worked hard, started business, grew filthy rich and got into politics. He loved the taste of power and money. But he missed having a nice sleep. He ripened into the art of making money fly like birds. People, however, elected him as parliament member because they thought he was the bird that could lay golden bank notes. Yet throughout his rich powerful life it seldom happened that he slept well.

“Chief, I am old. I can’t do fishing.” The rich man lays eyes on the face older than his. Instantaneously he shrinks into shame.

“Fishing is easy and fun. Even a 5-year-old kid can teach you that.”

“I see.”

“Why don’t you take a tour of the island while I go fishing?” the chief suggests. He asks the fishbone-necklaced girl to accompany him.

The rich man follows the woman along the beach. Surrounded by a lagoon, suffocated by sunflowers, the Happy Island is small, with about 150 inhabitants. From the sandy shore the lagoon is a voluptuous world. Many a man is fishing—on boats or from the rocks. Some kids are playing with a coconut. One or two women are bathing, naked of course. And here and there in the water floating are rafts of ducks.

“How is the world there you live?” the woman asks shyly.

“The world I’m from?” the rich man says. “It’s big. Bigger than your imagination. You can get there whatever you want. You work hard, make money and then have others work for you. But there’s too much of everything there.”

Flummoxed, the woman gazes at him. Over there the world must be beautiful, her face perhaps wants to say.

“You fancy seeing that part? Wearing nice and beautiful clothes?”

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/2

She smiles, tells two islanders left the island, but they came back few years later, begged the chief to stay. They had to leave anyway.

“Why?” asks the rich man.

“That’s the rule. If you go away, you go forever. You never return.”

“How are rules made here?”

She says all the rules in Happy Island are made by the longest-lived man. Of all he was the wisest. They keep following the rules to live happily.

“You people have any written language?”

“Written language?” she echoes.

“Yes, to keep records.” With two fingers he makes the sign of writing.

“Oh, we don’t do that. We can remember things fine.”

“What is the religion here?”

“Religion?”

“Yes. God.”

The woman casts him a vacant-look. “We know nothing of that. We fish. We eat. We sing. We sleep. Life is simple here.”

Simple: an obsolete word in the rich man’s book. His clothes, shoes, wristwatch and the perfume he has worn—all sophisticated, branded. He looks at the woman’s body. Sleek and smooth. Spontaneous. In his opulent outfit he rather feels like hiding, feels cheap.

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Over lunch, the rich man sits uncomfortably on the ground. His fat body is untrained to sit like that for long. Using two hands he carefully eats roasted fish served on banana leaves. The bones are not easy to remove. As side dishes there are sunflower seeds, yucca and fruits.

“What are you good at?” the chief asks him.

“What do you mean?” the rich man says.

The chief explains. Here every islander has one specialised skill. It could be anything. Painting, singing, dancing. Swimming, hunting, fishing. Making musical instruments or boats or building huts. Anything. It is a way of helping each other. Sharing skills makes life easier. It is not obligatory but expected that each should learn at least one skill.

The rich man understands. Certainly he has skills. He knows how to make money and boost industry, how to clear forests, resume lands and set up factories. He is good at politics too. He knows how to make two groups fight and take benefit from it. He takes the pride to bring his party back in power after the consecutive defeat in two terms.

“Well, I can...” the rich man bumbles. “I can... I am good at leading, anyway.”

“Leading?” the chief snorts. “No leading here. Happy islanders dislike to be led.”

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/2

Nonplussed, the rich man speaks in his former condescending voice. "What good it is to become the chief then?"

The chief smiles, takes time to answer. "It's a kind of honour post. There's nothing to do with leading here. Everyone is self-sufficient in this place. I told you."

At the end of eating comes tobacco. Though bad for his health, the rich man smokes the bitter leaf.

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It is the full moon night, the celebration night for Happy Islanders. Out on the beach, around fires, they are tiring the moon with singing and dancing. With swelling drums beating, life is alive and lively. Some are performing acrobatic skills. Some only chatting or telling stories. Some are roasting fish and meat and potatoes. Some serve fermented drinks.

The rich man has dropped the sign of civilisation from his body. In the grass skirt he feels he has begun life all again.

"Ah, what a lovely life!" he exclaims to the chief.

"You can stay here for as long as you want," the chief fills his coconut bowl with drink. "Just one thing to be told. It's not good time for this, but you should know."

The rich man straightens his back.

"Because of old age, if anyone here becomes bed-ridden, we poison the fellow to death."

"What?" he drops his drink. "That's barbaric."

"It is good for the dying fellow too," tells the chief, "to unburden the burden of his life. As the Happy islanders hate to be a burden on another's shoulders. The longest-lived man once made this rule when he poisoned himself."

Before the chief goes for dancing he gets a fresh coconut bowl, fills it and hands it to the rich man.

The rich man sits still. The breeze blended with music stirs him. A woman is singing a sad song.

*The life I had before
Was good, great
Can you take me
Back there, please?*

The rich man gets lost in his early farm life. The village then had no electricity. Life sunk in silence once the day died. Like these islanders they enjoyed occasional fun nights though. Staying late in the country fairs. Getting drunk in a neighbor's wedding—dancing and singing around the fire. Then in the dead of night going to bed to have a nice long sleep. A nice long sleep! For years he has been an insomniac. He hungers for having the taste of a long sleep. Like his old farm days.

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/2

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The following morning the rich man does not wake up. When they get in his hut to check, his faltering lips shed unintelligible sound. Oooooo. In bed his body is steady as a fallen log. His achromatic eyes restless, speaking all the languages of the earth. But the language has no letters, no words to express a sickly heart. His lips buzz with the swiftness of a butterfly wings and hum: Oooooo. Tears ooze from his eyes. The salty liquid streams down, floods his ear cavum, floods the entire grass bed. And in the flood water his body seems to be bobbing up and down.

“Perhaps he is thirsty,” says the chief. “Get me a bowl of water.”

Someone passes him water. The chief pours a little water into the buzzing lips. The liquid trickles out through the corner of his mouth, humming: Oooooo.

“It’s sad that we have to poison him,” tells the chief.

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Before noon they bury the rich man. Beside the burial they keep his loaded bag that he brought with him. As respect, one by one, the Happy Islanders pick a bundle of bank notes from that bag and spread it over the mound. When everyone has gone, the chief stands by the grave. He gathers all the bank notes left in the bag and scatters in the air. The man under will sure have a nice sleep feeling his possession.

“Poor man!” the chief sighs.