

Summertime Was Nearly Over

by **Brian Aldiss, 1925-2017**

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I am resolved to leave some brief account of my days whilst I am still able. It does not escape me that a fair hand has already written some account of my early days; but that account broke off too soon, for I returned from the realms of ice, to which solitudes my soul—if I may be presumed to have one—was attracted.

In due time, I returned to the country about the city of Geneva. Although I had hoped for justice and understanding when my story was known, that was not to be.

Persecution remained my lot. I had to escape to the nearby wilderness of mountain and ice, to live out my days among chamois and eagle, which were being hunted as avidly as I.

Before leaving the city for ever, I came across a philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, even more noted than the family of my accursed Master. At the beginning of one of his books I discovered these words, which to me in my lowly

condition were more than words: “I am made unlike anyone I have ever met; I will even venture to say that I am like no one in the whole world.”

Here was a sentiment I might have uttered myself. To find such understanding in a book gave me strength. Ever since coming upon Rousseau’s writings so long ago, I have tried to live with my dear wife above the glaciers in the condition he would have approved, that of the Noble Savage—in defiance of those citified creatures who multiply in the valleys far below.

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The placidity of a late August day lingers over the Swiss Alps. The sound of automobiles wending their way along the road far below does not reach me; I hear only a distant occasional cowbell and the cheerful nearer transactions of insects. I am at peace. The helicopters appeared after noon, when the clouds cleared from the brow of the Jungfrau. They had been active all week, unsettling me with their noise. There were two of them, blue, belonging to the Swiss police. Soon they disappeared behind a nearby slope, and I crawled from under the bush where I had hidden.

Once all was peace here. We did not know of tourists and helicopters.

Now the numbers of the People are increasing. If it isn’t helicopters, it’s cars on the way to the *Silberner Hirsch* below, or machines roaring in distant valleys. Elsbeth and I will have to move to a more remote place, if I can find one.

Elsbeth says she does not wish to move again. Our cave on the upper slopes of the Aletschhorn suits her well, but ours is a fugitive life, as I explain to her.

In summer, the People drive off the highway up the track leading to the *Silberner Hirsch*, with its fine view of the mountains to the north. Occasionally, one or two of them will leave their cars and climb higher, almost as far as the winter shelters. Perhaps they will pick the wild flowers growing in the lush grasses, cornflower, poppy, clover, eglantine, and the frail vetch.

They rarely reach the cave on its precipitous slope. I never molest the People. Elsbeth and I stay hidden. I protect her in my arms.

In winter, she and I are completely alone with the elements. My temperament is compatible with the wind and the snow and the storms born from the cold wombs of northern lakes. The People’s machines do not threaten us then. We survive somehow. I have learned not to be afraid of fire. I sit over its red eye in the cave and listen to the musics of the atmosphere.

I am kin with the slopes hereabouts. They are steep and treacherous with outcropping rock. No People come to ski on them. In the autumn, before the first snows fall, when fog rolls up from the valley, the hotel closes down, the People all depart. Only a boy lives at the hotel to act as watchman with his goats and chickens. That’s far below our eyrie—I go down there to scavenge.

Oh, I have seen that boy’s face full of fear as he stares through a window at me passing in a swirl of snow.

The winter world is without human inhabitants. I can’t explain it. I cannot explain to Elsbeth where the People go. Do they sleep all winter, like the waterfall?

This is the trouble: that I understand nothing. Long though I have lived, I never understand better as years pass. I never understand why the teeth of winter bite

so cruelly down into the bone, how daylight sickens from the east, why Elsbeth is so chill as I lie with her, why the nights are so long, without word or gleam.

I am troubled by my lack of understanding. Nothing remains, nothing remains.

Best not to think of another winter. It is summer now, time of happiness. But summertime is nearly over.

All this livelong day I lay on my favourite rock in the sun. The flies visited and crawled on me. Also many other small things that may have life and thought—butterflies, snails in curled shell, spiders, maggots. I lay staring at the People below, coming to and going from the *Silberner Hirsch*. They climb from their machines. They walk about and photograph the valley and the hill peaks. They enter the restaurant. In time, they come from it again. Then they drive away. Their cars are beads on the thread of highway. They have homes, often far distant. Their homes are full of all manner of possessions. They are capable of many kinds of activity. I hear their planes roar overhead, leaving a trail of snow across the sky. People are always busy, like the flies and ants.

This also they can do: procreate. I have mated many times with Elsbeth. She brings forth no child. Here is another thing I cannot understand. Why does Elsbeth not bring forth child? Is the fault in her or in me, because I am strangely made, because, as Rousseau said, “I am made unlike anyone I ever met”?

The grass grows high before my sight. I peer through its little ambush at the scene below. Even the grass makes more grass, and all the small things that live in the grass reproduce their kind, until summer is over. Everything conceives more things, except Elsbeth and I.

Elsbeth remained as usual in our cave beside the waterfall. When the good season is spent and cold bites to the bone, the waterfall dies like most other living things. Its music ceases. It becomes rigid and mute. What is this grief that visits the Earth so regularly? How to explain it?

Only in the spring does the waterfall recover, and then it roars with delight at regaining life, just as I did. Then Elsbeth and I are happy again.

My head becomes cloudy as I lie on my rock peering through the grass at the scene down below. After night has fallen, I will climb down the slopes to walk about unseen round the hotel and retrieve what the People have discarded. I find there something to eat, and many other things, discarded papers and books, this and that. The night is my friend. I am darkness itself.

Why it has to be thus I know not. Yet I have thought myself not to feel discontent. Once I was malicious because I was miserable, but no more. Now I have my lovely mate, I have schooled myself to be neither malicious nor miserable, and not to hate People.

In the discarded newspapers I read that there are People far more evil than ever I was. They take pleasure in killing the innocent. This murder they do not only with their bare hands but with extreme weapons, the nature of which I am unable to comprehend. Thousands die in their wars every year.

Sometimes I read the name of my Maker in the newspapers. Even after all this time, they still speak ill of him; why it does not therefore make me, his victim, welcome among People I do not know. This is something else eluding my understanding.

Lying in my cloudy state, I fall asleep without knowing it. The flies buzz and the sun is hot on my spine.

To dream can be very cruel. I try to tear these visions from myself. In my dreams, memories of dead People rise up. One claims that I have his thighs and legs, another that I have his torso. One wretch wishes his head returned, another even claims his internal organs. These desperate People parade in my sleep. I am a living cemetery, a hospital of flesh for those who lack flesh. What can I do? Within me I feel dreadful ghosts and crimes locked within my bones, knotted into my very entrails. I cannot pass water without a forgotten claimant reaching for what is his.

Do People suffer in this way? Being a mere composite from charnel houses, I fear that I alone undergo this sorrow behind the eyebrows. Residual scenes from dreadful other memories play like lice inside veins I hardly dare look on as mine. I feel myself a theatre of other lives and deaths.

Why then do People shun me? Have I not more humanity than they trapped inside me?

While I suffered from these dreams on my slab of rock, something woke me. I heard the sound of voices carried on the thin air. Two People, females, were climbing upwards. They had left behind the Silberner Hirsch and were moving towards the place where I lay.

I observed them with the silent attention a tiger must give its approaching prey. And yet not that exactly, for there was fear in my heart. The People always awaken fear in me. The elder of these two women was gathering wild flowers, exclaiming as she did so. It was innocent enough, yet still I felt the fear.

The elder female sank down on a tree stump to rest, fanning herself with her hand. The other one came on, picking her way cautiously. I saw the brown hair on the crown of her head, gleaming in the sun with a beauty I cannot describe.

She would have passed me by a few feet, perhaps not noticing me. Yet because I could not bear to lie where I was and chance being seen, I jumped up with a great bound and confronted her.

The female gave a gasp of fear, looking up at me with her mouth open, revealing tongue and white teeth.

“Help!” she called once, until I had my hand over the lower part of her face. The look she gave me changed from fear to disgust.

Oh, I’ve seen that look on the faces of People before. It always awakens my fury. The faces of People are unlike mine, plastic, mobile, given to expressing emotion. With one blow I could wipe that expression and the flesh that paints it right from their skulls.

As I lifted her, her toes dangled in their white trainers. I thrust my face into hers, that female face dewed with the heat of afternoon. As I considered whether to smash her and throw her down on the mountainside, I caught her scent. It hit me as forcibly as a blow to the stomach.

That scent... So different from the scent of Elsbeth... It caused a kind of confusion in my brain, making me pause. One of those old elusive memories from the back of my brain returned to baffle me—a memory of something that had never happened to me. I have said I understand little; at that moment I understood nothing, and that terrible lack ran through me like an electric shock. I put her down.

“You monster...” the female said, staggering. Beneath us, the descents were toothed with jagged rock. Rather than fall, she clung to my arm—a gesture so trusting in its way as to melt the remains of my anger. I could remember only how vulnerable People were, the females in particular. At that instant, I would have fought a wild beast in order to preserve her unharmed.

As though sensing some abatement of my ferocity, she said in a natural tone, “I did not mean to startle you.”

When I could not think how to answer this, unaccustomed as I was to conversing with People, she went on, “Do you speak English? I am just a tourist here on vacation.”

Still I could not answer, from her scent and from the look of her. It was as if a little wild doe had come to me, all quivering with a half-mistrust. She was young. Her face was round and open, without scars from medical science. Her grey eyes were set in a brown skin smooth like the shell of a hen’s egg. The hair I had watched from above had become disturbed when I lifted her, so that it shaded the line of her left cheek. She wore a T-shirt with the name of an American university printed on it, and denim shorts cut ragged round her plump thighs. Beneath the shirt I saw the outline of her breasts. That outline held so entrancing a meaning that I was further disarmed.

My difficulty in breathing was such that I clutched my throat.

She looked at me with what I took to be concern.

“Say, you okay? My friend’s a doctor. Maybe I’ll call her to come on up.”

“Don’t call,” I said. I sat down in the long grass, puzzled to understand my weakness. In some elusive way, here before me was the representative of something, some enormous sphere of sensations and transcendent values such as I had only read about, something my Maker had withheld from me which I desperately needed. That I could put no name to it made it all the more tantalising, like a song when only the tune remains and the words are lost by time.

“My friend can help,” said this astonishing young person. She turned as if to call but I growled at her again, “Don’t call,” in so urgent a voice that she desisted. When she looked up the mountainside, as if searching for help there, I realised that she still had fear of me, little knowing the true state of affairs, and felt herself like an animal in a trap.

“But you’re ill,” she said. “Or else in trouble with the law.”

Her remark released my ability to speak to her. “My trouble is with the law of humanity, which rules against me. Law is invented to protect the rulers, not the ruled; the strong, not the weak. No court on Earth is concerned with justice, only the law. The weak can anticipate persecution, not justice.”

“But you are not weak,” she said.

Her grey eyes when she looked at me made me tremble. When the moon is high, I roam the mountainside much of the night. That dear silver dish in the sky is like an eye, guarding me. But in the grey eyes of this female I read only a kind of concealed hostility.

“Justice is only a name. Persecution and weakness are real enough. Those who for whatsoever reason have no roof over their heads are no better than deer to be hunted down.”

My words appeared to make no impression on her. "In my country, there is Welfare to look after the homeless."

"You know nothing."

She did not dispute that, merely standing before me, head bowed, yet sneaking side glances at me and round about.

"Where do you live?" she asked, in a minute.

I jerked my head in the direction of the mountain above us.

"Alone?"

"With my wife. Are you... a wife?"

She dismissed the question with a toss of her head.

I listened to the flies buzzing about me and the murmur of the bees in the clover as they tumbled at our feet. These small sounds were the building bricks of the silence that enfolded us.

She stuck out a small brown hand. "I'm not afraid any more. I'm sorry I startled you. Why don't you take me to visit with your wife? What's her name?"

At that, I was silent with mistrust a long time. Her scent reached me as I took the hand gently into mine and looked down at her.

Finally, I spoke the sacred name. "Elsbeth."

She too paused before responding. "Mine's Vicky." She did not ask my name, nor did I offer it.

There we stood on the perilous slope. This encounter had used much of my courage. I had caught her, yet still I feared her. While I contemplated her, she continued to look about with uneasy glances like a trapped animal, and I saw her breasts move with her breathing. Now those honest grey eyes, which I associated with the moon, were furtive and unkind.

"Well then," she said, with an uneasy laugh, "what's keeping us? Let's go."

Perhaps my Maker did not intend that my brain should function perfectly. This little thing whose hand I held could easily be crushed. There was no reason for me to fear it. Yet fear it I did, so greatly did the idea come to me that if I took her up to the cave to meet Elsbeth, she would somehow have trapped me instead of her.

Yet this notion was conquered by a stronger urge I could not deny.

If I led this tender scented female to the cave, she would then be far away from her friend and entirely within my power. We would be private to do that supreme thing, whether she wished for it or not. Elsbeth would understand if I overpowered her and had my way with her. Why should I not? Why else was this morsel, this Vicky, sent to me?

Even at the cost of revealing the whereabouts of the cave to one of the People I must take this specimen there—I must, so great was my urge, thundering in me like the breakers of an ocean. When I was finished with her, I would make sure she did not give our hiding place away. Elsbeth would approve of that. Then our secret life could continue as before, with only the small wild things knowing of our existence.

So thereupon I echoed her words. "Let's go."

The way was steep. She was puny. I kept good hold of her, part-dragging her after me. The afternoon sun blazed on us and her scent rose to me, together with her sobs.

The bushes became smaller, more scanty. I had come this way a hundred times, always varying my route so as to avoid making more of a track than a rabbit might do. We came to the Cleft, a shallow indentation, a fold in the flesh of the mountain. Here the infant waterfall played its tune, gushing with pure water which, several hundred feet down the valley, would become a tributary of the Lotschental river. Behind the fall, hidden by a dark-leaved shrub, was the entrance to the cave.

Here we had to pause. She claimed she must get her breath back. She bent double and stayed that way, and her brown hair hung down, and her little fingertips touched the ground.

Great white clouds rolled above us, tumbling over the mountain summit as if eager to find quieter air. Of a sudden, one of the police helicopters shot overhead, startling me with its enormous clatter, as if the thing were a flying tree, streaking out of sight behind the crisp crest of the Jungfrau. I had no time to hide before it was over and gone.

I grabbed the girl and pulled. "Into the cave with you."

She struggled. "What if Elsbeth doesn't want to see me? Shouldn't you warn her first? Why don't you call her out here?"

Not answering, I dragged her towards the cave. She seized at a bush but I beat her hand away.

"I don't want to see Elsbeth," she screamed. "Help! Help!"

Silencing her with a hand enveloping her face, I half-lifted her and so we entered the cave, the girl struggling furiously.

Elsbeth lay there in the shade, watching everything, saying nothing. I let the girl loose and pushed her towards my wife.

The girl went motionless, staring forward, one hand to her lips. There was no sound but the high buzz of flies. I waited for her to try to scream again, readying myself to leap upon her and bear her down. But when she spoke, it was softly, with her gaze on Elsbeth, not me.

"She's been dead a very long time, hasn't she?"

Some People can cry. I have no facility for tears. Yet as soon as this activity began in Vicky, a storm of weeping—as I judged the sensation—accumulated in my breast like a storm over the Alps. In Elsbeth's eyes no movement showed. The maggots had done their work in those sockets and moved to other pastures.

As I raised my hands above my head and let out a howl, two male people rushed into the cave. They yelled as they came. The weeping girl, Vicky, threw herself out of danger into the recesses of the cave, where I stored the fruits of the autumn. The men flung a net over me.

Wildly though I struggled, using all my strength, the net was unbreakable. The male People drew it tight, as fishermen must have done when they hauled in a catch in olden times. They shackled my legs so that I could not run. Then they felled me, so that I lay by Elsbeth and was as helpless as she.

Those People treated me as if I were no better than an animal. I was dragged out of the cave, through the waterfall, to lie on my back gazing up at the fast-moving clouds in the blue sky, and I thought to myself, Those clouds are free, just as I was until now.

More male People arrived. I found out how they came there soon enough. One of their helicopters was standing on a level ledge of mountainside above my refuge. The female, Vicky, came to me and bent down so that I could look again into her grey eyes.

“I regret this,” she said. “I had to act as decoy. We knew you were somewhere up on the Aletschhorn, but not exactly where. We’ve been combing this mountainside all week.”

My faculty of speech was deserting me along with my other powers. I managed to say, “So you are just an accomplice of these other cruel beasts.”

“I am working with the local police, yes. Don’t blame me...”

One of the male police nudged her. “Out of the way, miss. He’s still dangerous. Stand back there.” And she moved away.

I was lifted up and lashed to a stretcher. Her face disappeared from my sight. Still encased in the net, I was dropped on the ground as if I were an old plank. They shouted a great deal, and waved their arms. Only then did I realise they were going to transport me up the mountain. Five male People were there, one of them controlling the other four. They looked down on me. Again those expressions of disgust: I might have been a leopard trapped by big-game hunters, when mercy did not enter into their thoughts.

The male person who ordered the others around had a mouth full of small grey teeth. Staring down, he said, “We’re not letting you escape this time, you freak of nature. We have a list of murders stretching back over the last two centuries for which you are responsible.”

Though I read no sympathy in his face or mouth, I found a few words to offer. “Sir, I had never an intent to offend. It was my Maker who offended against me, acting so unfatherly against one who never asked to be born in any unnatural way. As for these murders, as you name them, the first one only, that of the child, was done in malice, when I had no knowledge of those states of being which you, not I, can enjoy—to wit, life and death. The rest of my offences were committed in self-defence, when I found the hands of all People were against me. Let me free, I pray. Let me live upon this blessed mountain, in the state of nature and innocence described by Rousseau.”

His mouth thinned and elongated like an earthworm. “You shit,” he said, turning away.

Another male appeared over the ragged skyline.

“Chopper’s ready,” he called.

They swung into action. I was lifted up. It took four of them to carry me. I could not see the female but, as I was raised to their shoulders, I caught a glimpse of my happy home, that cave where Elsbeth and I had been so content. Then it was gone, and they laboured up the slope with me, trussed and helpless.

As we approached the helicopter, a shower burst over us, one of those unheralded showers which sweep the Alps. I tasted the blessed rain on my lips, drinking it even while the People complained. I thought, this is the last time I taste of the benisons of nature. I am being taken to the realms of the People, who hate nature as much as they hate me, who am unnatural.

A chill sharpened the flavour of the water. It carried the taint of autumn, that melancholy transition time before winter. Summertime was nearly over, and my

wife would lie alone and lonely in our cave, waiting for my return, looking with her sightless eyes for her lover, uttering never a word of complaint.

