

Script: La Jetee

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Marker, Chris. *La Jetée: ciné-roman*. New York: Zone Books, 1992.

This is the story of a man, marked by an image from his childhood. The violent scene that upsets him, and whose meaning he was to grasp only years later, happened on the main jetty at Orly, the Paris airport, sometime before the outbreak of World War III.

Orly, Sunday. Parents used to take their children there to watch the departing planes.

On this particular Sunday, the child whose story we are telling was bound to remember the frozen sun, the setting at the end of the jetty, and a woman's face.

Nothing sorts out memories from ordinary moments. Later on they do claim remembrance when they show their scars. That face he had seen was to be the only peacetime image to survive the war. Had he really seen it? Or had he invented that tender moment to prop up the madness to come?

The sudden roar, the woman's gesture, the crumpling body, and the cries of the crowd on the jetty blurred by fear.

Later, he knew he had seen a man die.

And sometime after came the destruction of Paris.

Many died. Some believed themselves to be victors. Others were taken prisoner.

The survivors settled beneath Chaillot, in an underground network of galleries.

Above ground, Paris, as most of the world, was uninhabitable, riddled with radioactivity.

The victors stood guard over an empire of rats.

The prisoners were subjected to experiments, apparently of great concern to those who conducted them.

The outcome was a disappointment for some - death for others - and for others yet, madness.

One day they came to select a new guinea pig from among the prisoners.

He was the man whose story we are telling.

He was frightened. He had heard about the Head Experimenter. He was prepared to meet Dr. Frankenstein, or the Mad Scientist. Instead, he met a reasonable man who explained calmly that the human race was doomed. Space was off-limits. The only hope for survival lay in Time. A loophole in Time, and then maybe it would be possible to reach food, medicine, sources of energy.

This was the aim of the experiments: to send emissaries into Time, to summon the Past and Future to the aid of the Present.

But the human mind balked at the idea. To wake up in another age meant to be born again as an adult. The shock would be too great.

Having only sent lifeless or insentient bodies through different zones of Time, the inventors were now concentrating on men given to very strong mental images. If they were able to conceive or dream another time, perhaps they would be able to live in it.

The camp police spied even on dreams.

This man was selected from among a thousand for his obsession with an image from the past.

Nothing else, at first, but stripping out the present, and its racks.

They begin again.

The man doesn't die, nor does he go mad. He suffers.

They continue.

On the tenth day, images begin to ooze, like confessions.

A peacetime morning. A peacetime bedroom, a real bedroom. Real children. Real birds. Real cats. Real graves.

On the sixteenth day he is on the jetty at Orly. Empty.

Sometimes he recaptures a day of happiness, though different.

A face of happiness, though different.

Ruins.

A girl who could be the one he seeks. He passes her on the jetty. She smiles at him from an automobile. Other images appear, merge, in that museum, which is perhaps that of his memory.

On the thirtieth day, the meeting takes place. Now he is sure he recognizes her. In fact, it is the only thing he is sure of, in the middle of this dateless world that at first stuns him with its affluence. Around him, only fabulous materials: glass, plastic, terry cloth. When he recovers from his trance, the woman has gone.

The experimenters tighten their control. They send him back out on the trail.

Time rolls back again, the moment returns.

This time he is close to her, he speaks to her. She welcomes him without surprise. They are without memories, without plans. Time builds itself painlessly around them. Their only landmarks are the flavor of the moment they are living and the markings on the walls.

Later on, they are in a garden. He remembers there were gardens.

She asks him about his necklace, the combat necklace he wore at the start of the war that is yet to come. He invents an explanation.

They walk. They look at the trunk of a redwood tree covered with historical

dates. She pronounces an English name he doesn't understand. As in a dream, he shows her a point beyond the tree, hears himself say, "This is where I come from ..." - and falls back, exhausted. Then another wave of Time washes over him. The result of another injection perhaps.

Now she is asleep in the sun. He knows that in this world to which he has just returned for a while, only to be sent back to her, she is dead. She wakes up. He speaks again. Of a truth too fantastic to be believed he retains the essential:

an unreachable country, a long way to go. She listens. She doesn't laugh.

Is it the same day? He doesn't know. They shall go on like this, on countless walks in which an unspoken trust, an unadulterated trust will grow between them, without memories or plans. Up to the moment where he feels - ahead of them - a barrier.

And this was the end of the first experiment.

It was the starting point for a whole series of tests, in which he would meet her at different times. Sometimes he finds her in front of their markings. She welcomes him in a simple way. She calls him her Ghost.

One day she seems frightened. One day she leans toward him. As for him, he never knows whether he moves toward her, whether he is driven, whether he has made it up, or whether he is only dreaming.

Around the fiftieth day, they meet in a museum filled with timeless animals. Now the aim is perfectly adjusted. Thrown at the right moment, he may stay there and

move without effort.

She too seems tamed. She accepts as a natural phenomenon the ways of this visitor who comes and goes, who exists, talks, laughs with her, stops talking, listens to her, then disappears.

Once back in the experiment room, he knew something was different. The camp leader was there. From the conversation around him, he gathered that after the brilliant results of the tests in the Past, they now meant to ship him into the Future. His excitement made him forget for a moment that the meeting at the museum had been the last.

The Future was better protected than the Past. After more, painful tries, he eventually caught some waves of the world to come. He went through a brand new planet, Paris rebuilt, ten thousand incomprehensible avenues. Others were waiting for him. It was a brief encounter. Obviously, they rejected these scoriae of another time.

He recited his lesson: because humanity had survived, it could not refuse to its own past the means of its survival. This sophism was taken for Fate in disguise.

They gave him a power unit strong enough to put all human industry back into motion, and again the gates of the Future were closed.

Sometime after his return, he was transferred to another part of the camp. He knew that his jailers would not spare him. He had been a tool in their hands, his childhood image had been used as bait to condition him, he had lived up to their expectations, he had played his part. Now he only waited to be liquidated with, somewhere inside him, the memory of a twice-lived fragment of time.

And deep in this limbo, he received a message from the people of the world to come. They too travelled through Time, and more easily. Now they were there, ready to accept him as one of their own. But he had a different request: rather than this pacified future, he wanted to be returned to the world of his childhood, and to this woman who was perhaps waiting for him.

Once again the main jetty at Orly, in the middle of this warm pre-war Sunday afternoon where he could not stay, he thought in a confused way that the child he had been was due to be there too, watching the planes.

But first of all he looked for the woman's face, at the end of the jetty. He ran toward her. And when he recognized the man who had trailed him since the underground camp, he understood there was no way to escape Time, and that this moment he had been granted to watch as a child, which had never ceased to obsess him, was the moment of his own death.