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| **The Veldt by Ray Bradbury, 1950** "George, I wish you'd look at the nursery." "What's wrong with it?" "I don't know." "Well, then." "I just want you to look at it, is all, or call a psychologist in to look at it." "What would a psychologist want with a nursery?" "You know very well what he'd want." His wife paused in the middle ofthe kitchen and watched the stove busy humming to itself, making supper for four. "It's just that the nursery is different now than it was." "All right, let's have a look." They walked down the hall of their soundproofed Happylife Home, whichhad cost them thirty thousand dollars installed, this house which clothedand fed and rocked them to sleep and played and sang and was good to them.Their approach sensitized a switch somewhere and the nursery light flickedon when they came within ten feet of it. Similarly, behind them, in thehalls, lights went on and off as they left them behind, with a softautomaticity. "Well," said George Hadley. They stood on the thatched floor of the nursery. It was forty feetacross by forty feet long and thirty feet high; it had cost half again asmuch as the rest of the house. "But nothing's too good for our children,"George had said. The nursery was silent. It was empty as a jungle glade at hot highnoon. The walls were blank and two dimensional. Now, as George and LydiaHadley stood in the center of the room, the walls began to purr and recedeinto crystalline distance, it seemed, and presently an African veldtappeared, in three dimensions, on all sides, in color reproduced to thefinal pebble and bit of straw. The ceiling above them became a deep sky witha hot yellow sun. George Hadley felt the perspiration start on his brow. "Let's get out of this sun," he said. "This is a little too real. But Idon't see anything wrong." "Wait a moment, you'll see," said his wife. Now the hidden odorophonics were beginning to blow a wind of odor atthe two people in the middle of the baked veldtland. The hot straw smell oflion grass, the cool green smell of the hidden water hole, the great rustysmell of animals, the smell of dust like a red paprika in the hot air. Andnow the sounds: the thump of distant antelope feet on grassy sod, the paperyrustling of vultures. A shadow passed through the sky. The shadow flickeredon George Hadley's upturned, sweating face. "Filthy creatures," he heard his wife say. "The vultures." "You see, there are the lions, far over, that way. Now they're on theirway to the water hole. They've just been eating," said Lydia. "I don't know what." "Some animal." George Hadley put his hand up to shield off the burninglight from his squinted eyes. "A zebra or a baby giraffe, maybe." "Are you sure?" His wife sounded peculiarly tense. "No, it's a little late to be sure," he said, amused. "Nothing overthere I can see but cleaned bone, and the vultures dropping for what's left." "Did you bear that scream?" she asked. 'No." "About a minute ago?" "Sorry, no." The lions were coming. And again George Hadley was filled withadmiration for the mechanical genius who had conceived this room. A miracleof efficiency selling for an absurdly low price. Every home should have one.Oh, occasionally they frightened you with their clinical accuracy, theystartled you, gave you a twinge, but most of the time what fun for everyone,not only your own son and daughter, but for yourself when you felt like aquick jaunt to a foreign land, a quick change of scenery. Well, here it was! And here were the lions now, fifteen feet away, so real, so feverishlyand startlingly real that you could feel the prickling fur on your hand, andyour mouth was stuffed with the dusty upholstery smell of their heatedpelts, and the yellow of them was in your eyes like the yellow of anexquisite French tapestry, the yellows of lions and summer grass, and thesound of the matted lion lungs exhaling on the silent noontide, and thesmell of meat from the panting, dripping mouths. The lions stood looking at George and Lydia Hadley with terriblegreen-yellow eyes. "Watch out!" screamed Lydia. The lions came running at them. Lydia bolted and ran. Instinctively, George sprang after her. Outside,in the hall, with the door slammed he was laughing and she was crying, andthey both stood appalled at the other's reaction. "George!" "Lydia! Oh, my dear poor sweet Lydia!" "They almost got us!" "Walls, Lydia, remember; crystal walls, that's all they are. Oh, theylook real, I must admit - Africa in your parlor - but it's all dimensional,superreactionary, supersensitive color film and mental tape film behindglass screens. It's all odorophonics and sonics, Lydia. Here's my handkerchief." "I'm afraid." She came to him and put her body against him and criedsteadily. "Did you see? Did you feel? It's too real." "Now, Lydia..." "You've got to tell Wendy and Peter not to read any more on Africa." "Of course - of course." He patted her. "Promise?" "Sure." "And lock the nursery for a few days until I get my nerves settled." "You know how difficult Peter is about that. When I punished him amonth ago by locking the nursery for even a few hours - the tantrum hethrew! And Wendy too. They live for the nursery." "It's got to be locked, that's all there is to it." "All right." Reluctantly he locked the huge door. "You've been workingtoo hard. You need a rest." "I don't know - I don't know," she said, blowing her nose, sitting downin a chair that immediately began to rock and comfort her. "Maybe I don'thave enough to do. Maybe I have time to think too much. Why don't we shutthe whole house off for a few days and take a vacation?" "You mean you want to fry my eggs for me?" "Yes." She nodded. "And dam my socks?" "Yes." A frantic, watery-eyed nodding. "And sweep the house?" "Yes, yes - oh, yes!'' "But I thought that's why we bought this house, so we wouldn't have todo anything?" "That's just it. I feel like I don't belong here. The house is wife andmother now, and nursemaid. Can I compete with an African veldt? Can I give abath and scrub the children as efficiently or quickly as the automatic scrubbath can? I cannot. And it isn't just me. It's you. You've been awfullynervous lately." "I suppose I have been smoking too much." "You look as if you didn't know what to do with yourself in this house,either. You smoke a little more every morning and drink a little more everyafternoon and need a little more sedative every night. You're beginning tofeel unnecessary too." "Am I?" He paused and tried to feel into himself to see what was really there. "Oh, George!" She looked beyond him, at the nursery door. "Those lionscan't get out of there, can they?" He looked at the door and saw it tremble as if something had jumpedagainst it from the other side. "Of course not," he said.  At dinner they ate alone, for Wendy and Peter were at a special plasticcarnival across town and bad televised home to say they'd be late, to goahead eating. So George Hadley, bemused, sat watching the dining-room tableproduce warm dishes of food from its mechanical interior. "We forgot the ketchup," he said. "Sorry," said a small voice within the table, and ketchup appeared. As for the nursery, thought George Hadley, it won't hurt for thechildren to be locked out of it awhile. Too much of anything isn't good foranyone. And it was clearly indicated that the children had been spending alittle too much time on Africa. That sun. He could feel it on his neck,still, like a hot paw. And the lions. And the smell of blood. Remarkable howthe nursery caught the telepathic emanations of the children's minds andcreated life to fill their every desire. The children thought lions, andthere were lions. The children thought zebras, and there were zebras. Sun -sun. Giraffes - giraffes. Death and death. That last. He chewed tastelessly on the meat that the table bad cut forhim. Death thoughts. They were awfully young, Wendy and Peter, for deaththoughts. Or, no, you were never too young, really. Long before you knewwhat death was you were wishing it on someone else. When you were two yearsold you were shooting people with cap pistols. But this - the long, hot African veldt-the awful death in the jaws of alion. And repeated again and again. "Where are you going?" He didn't answer Lydia. Preoccupied, be let the lights glow softly onahead of him, extinguish behind him as he padded to the nursery door. Helistened against it. Far away, a lion roared. He unlocked the door and opened it. Just before he stepped inside, heheard a faraway scream. And then another roar from the lions, which subsidedquickly. He stepped into Africa. How many times in the last year had he openedthis door and found Wonderland, Alice, the Mock Turtle, or Aladdin and hisMagical Lamp, or Jack Pumpkinhead of Oz, or Dr. Doolittle, or the cowjumping over a very real-appearing moon-all the delightful contraptions of amake-believe world. How often had he seen Pegasus flying in the sky ceiling,or seen fountains of red fireworks, or heard angel voices singing. But now,is yellow hot Africa, this bake oven with murder in the heat. Perhaps Lydiawas right. Perhaps they needed a little vacation from the fantasy which wasgrowing a bit too real for ten-year-old children. It was all right toexercise one's mind with gymnastic fantasies, but when the lively child mindsettled on one pattern... ? It seemed that, at a distance, for the pastmonth, he had heard lions roaring, and smelled their strong odor seeping asfar away as his study door. But, being busy, he had paid it no attention. George Hadley stood on the African grassland alone. The lions looked upfrom their feeding, watching him. The only flaw to the illusion was the opendoor through which he could see his wife, far down the dark hall, like aframed picture, eating her dinner abstractedly. "Go away," he said to the lions. They did not go. He knew the principle of the room exactly. You sent out your thoughts.Whatever you thought would appear. "Let's have Aladdin and his lamp," hesnapped. The veldtland remained; the lions remained. "Come on, room! I demand Aladin!" he said. Nothing happened. The lions mumbled in their baked pelts. "Aladin!" He went back to dinner. "The fool room's out of order," he said. "Itwon't respond." "Or--" "Or what?" "Or it can't respond," said Lydia, "because the children have thoughtabout Africa and lions and killing so many days that the room's in a rut." "Could be." "Or Peter's set it to remain that way." "Set it?" "He may have got into the machinery and fixed something." "Peter doesn't know machinery." "He's a wise one for ten. That I.Q. of his -" "Nevertheless -" "Hello, Mom. Hello, Dad." The Hadleys turned. Wendy and Peter were coming in the front door,cheeks like peppermint candy, eyes like bright blue agate marbles, a smellof ozone on their jumpers from their trip in the helicopter. "You're just in time for supper," said both parents. "We're full of strawberry ice cream and hot dogs," said the children,holding hands. "But we'll sit and watch." "Yes, come tell us about the nursery," said George Hadley. The brother and sister blinked at him and then at each other."Nursery?" "All about Africa and everything," said the father with falsejoviality. "I don't understand," said Peter. "Your mother and I were just traveling through Africa with rod andreel; Tom Swift and his Electric Lion," said George Hadley. "There's no Africa in the nursery," said Peter simply. "Oh, come now, Peter. We know better." "I don't remember any Africa," said Peter to Wendy. "Do you?" "No." "Run see and come tell." She obeyed. "Wendy, come back here!" said George Hadley, but she was gone. Thehouse lights followed her like a flock of fireflies. Too late, he realizedhe had forgotten to lock the nursery door after his last inspection. "Wendy'll look and come tell us," said Peter. "She doesn't have to tell me. I've seen it." "I'm sure you're mistaken, Father." "I'm not, Peter. Come along now." But Wendy was back. "It's not Africa," she said breathlessly. "We'll see about this," said George Hadley, and they all walked downthe hall together and opened the nursery door. There was a green, lovely forest, a lovely river, a purple mountain,high voices singing, and Rima, lovely and mysterious, lurking in the treeswith colorful flights of butterflies, like animated bouquets, lingering inher long hair. The African veldtland was gone. The lions were gone. OnlyRima was here now, singing a song so beautiful that it brought tears to youreyes. George Hadley looked in at the changed scene. "Go to bed," he said tothe children. They opened their mouths. "You heard me," he said. They went off to the air closet, where a wind sucked them like brownleaves up the flue to their slumber rooms. George Hadley walked through the singing glade and picked up somethingthat lay in the comer near where the lions had been. He walked slowly backto his wife. "What is that?" she asked. "An old wallet of mine," he said. He showed it to her. The smell of hot grass was on it and the smell ofa lion. There were drops of saliva on it, it bad been chewed, and there wereblood smears on both sides. He closed the nursery door and locked it, tight. In the middle of the night he was still awake and he knew his wife wasawake. "Do you think Wendy changed it?" she said at last, in the dark room. "Of course." "Made it from a veldt into a forest and put Rima there instead of lions?" "Yes." "Why?" "I don't know. But it's staying locked until I find out." "How did your wallet get there?" "I don't know anything," he said, "except that I'm beginning to besorry we bought that room for the children. If children are neurotic at all,a room like that -" "It's supposed to help them work off their neuroses in a healthfulway." "I'm starting to wonder." He stared at the ceiling. "We've given the children everything they ever wanted. Is this ourreward-secrecy, disobedience?" "Who was it said, 'Children are carpets, they should be stepped onoccasionally'? We've never lifted a hand. They're insufferable - let's admitit. They come and go when they like; they treat us as if we were offspring.They're spoiled and we're spoiled." "They've been acting funny ever since you forbade them to take therocket to New York a few months ago." "They're not old enough to do that alone, I explained." "Nevertheless, I've noticed they've been decidedly cool toward ussince." "I think I'll have David McClean come tomorrow morning to have a lookat Africa." "But it's not Africa now, it's Green Mansions country and Rima." "I have a feeling it'll be Africa again before then." A moment later they heard the screams. Two screams. Two people screaming from downstairs. And then a roar oflions. "Wendy and Peter aren't in their rooms," said his wife. He lay in his bed with his beating heart. "No," he said. "They'vebroken into the nursery." "Those screams - they sound familiar." "Do they?" "Yes, awfully." And although their beds tried very hard, the two adults couldn't berocked to sleep for another hour. A smell of cats was in the night air. "Father?" said Peter. "Yes." Peter looked at his shoes. He never looked at his father any more, norat his mother. "You aren't going to lock up the nursery for good, are you?" "That all depends." "On what?" snapped Peter. "On you and your sister. If you intersperse this Africa with a littlevariety - oh, Sweden perhaps, or Denmark or China -" "I thought we were free to play as we wished." "You are, within reasonable bounds." "What's wrong with Africa, Father?" "Oh, so now you admit you have been conjuring up Africa, do you?" "I wouldn't want the nursery locked up," said Peter coldly. "Ever." "Matter of fact, we're thinking of turning the whole house off forabout a month. Live sort of a carefree one-for-all existence." "That sounds dreadful! Would I have to tie my own shoes instead ofletting the shoe tier do it? And brush my own teeth and comb my hair andgive myself a bath?" "It would be fun for a change, don't you think?" "No, it would be horrid. I didn't like it when you took out the picturepainter last month." "That's because I wanted you to learn to paint all by yourself, son." "I don't want to do anything but look and listen and smell; what elseis there to do?" "All right, go play in Africa." "Will you shut off the house sometime soon?" "We're considering it." "I don't think you'd better consider it any more, Father." "I won't have any threats from my son!" "Very well." And Peter strolled off to the nursery. "Am I on time?" said David McClean. "Breakfast?" asked George Hadley. "Thanks, had some. What's the trouble?" "David, you're a psychologist." "I should hope so." "Well, then, have a look at our nursery. You saw it a year ago when youdropped by; did you notice anything peculiar about it then?" "Can't say I did; the usual violences, a tendency toward a slightparanoia here or there, usual in children because they feel persecuted byparents constantly, but, oh, really nothing." They walked down the hall. "I locked the nursery up," explained thefather,"and the children broke back into it during the night. I let themstay so they could form the patterns for you to see." There was a terrible screaming from the nursery. "There it is," said George Hadley. "See what you make of it." They walked in on the children without rapping. The screams had faded. The lions were feeding. "Run outside a moment, children," said George Hadley. "No, don't changethe mental combination. Leave the walls as they are. Get!" With the children gone, the two men stood studying the lions clusteredat a distance, eating with great relish whatever it was they had caught. "I wish I knew what it was," said George Hadley. "Sometimes I canalmost see. Do you think if I brought high-powered binoculars here and -" David McClean laughed dryly. "Hardly." He turned to study all fourwalls. "How long has this been going on?" "A little over a month." "It certainly doesn't feel good." "I want facts, not feelings." "My dear George, a psychologist never saw a fact in his life. He onlyhears about feelings; vague things. This doesn't feel good, I tell you.Trust my hunches and my instincts. I have a nose for something bad. This isvery bad. My advice to you is to have the whole damn room torn down and yourchildren brought to me every day during the next year for treatment." "Is it that bad?" "I'm afraid so. One of the original uses of these nurseries was so thatwe could study the patterns left on the walls by the child's mind, study atour leisure, and help the child. In this case, however, the room has becomea channel toward-destructive thoughts, instead of a release away from them." "Didn't you sense this before?" "I sensed only that you bad spoiled your children more than most. Andnow you're letting them down in some way. What way?" "I wouldn't let them go to New York." "What else?" "I've taken a few machines from the house and threatened them, a monthago, with closing up the nursery unless they did their homework. I did closeit for a few days to show I meant business." "Ah, ha!" "Does that mean anything?" "Everything. Where before they had a Santa Claus now they have aScrooge. Children prefer Santas. You've let this room and this house replaceyou and your wife in your children's affections. This room is their motherand father, far more important in their lives than their real parents. Andnow you come along and want to shut it off. No wonder there's hatred here.You can feel it coming out of the sky. Feel that sun. George, you'll have tochange your life. Like too many others, you've built it around creaturecomforts. Why, you'd starve tomorrow if something went wrong in yourkitchen. You wouldn't know how to fry an egg. Nevertheless, turn everythingoff. Start new. It'll take time. But we'll make good children out of bad ina year, wait and see." "But won't the shock be too much for the children, shutting the room upabruptly, for good?" "I don't want them going any deeper into this, that's all." The lions were finished with their red feast. The lions were standing on the edge of the clearing watching the twomen. "Now I'm feeling persecuted," said McClean. "Let's get out of here. Inever have cared for these damned rooms. Make me nervous." "The lions look real, don't they?" said George Hadley. I don't supposethere's any way -" "What?" "- that they could become real?" "Not that I know." "Some flaw in the machinery, a tampering or something?" "No." They went to the door. "I don't imagine the room will like being turned off," said the father. "Nothing ever likes to die - even a room." "I wonder if it hates me for wanting to switch it off?" "Paranoia is thick around here today," said David McClean. "You canfollow it like a spoor. Hello." He bent and picked up a bloody scarf. "Thisyours?" "No." George Hadley's face was rigid. "It belongs to Lydia." They went to the fuse box together and threw the switch that killed thenursery. The two children were in hysterics. They screamed and pranced and threwthings. They yelled and sobbed and swore and jumped at the furniture. "You can't do that to the nursery, you can't!'' "Now, children." The children flung themselves onto a couch, weeping. "George," said Lydia Hadley, "turn on the nursery, just for a fewmoments. You can't be so abrupt." "No." "You can't be so cruel..." "Lydia, it's off, and it stays off. And the whole damn house dies as ofhere and now. The more I see of the mess we've put ourselves in, the more itsickens me. We've been contemplating our mechanical, electronic navels fortoo long. My God, how we need a breath of honest air!" And he marched about the house turning off the voice clocks, thestoves, the heaters, the shoe shiners, the shoe lacers, the body scrubbersand massagers, and every other machine be could put his hand on. The house was full of dead bodies, it seemed. It felt like a mechanicalcemetery. So silent. None of the humming hidden energy of machines waitingto function at the tap of a button. "Don't let them do it!" wailed Peter at the ceiling, as if he wastalking to the house, the nursery. "Don't let Father kill everything." Heturned to his father. "Oh, I hate you!" "Insults won't get you anywhere." "I wish you were dead!" "We were, for a long while. Now we're going to really start living.Instead of being handled and massaged, we're going to live." Wendy was still crying and Peter joined her again. "Just a moment, justone moment, just another moment of nursery," they wailed. "Oh, George," said the wife, "it can't hurt." "All right - all right, if they'll just shut up. One minute, mind you,and then off forever." "Daddy, Daddy, Daddy!" sang the children, smiling with wet faces. "And then we're going on a vacation. David McClean is coming back inhalf an hour to help us move out and get to the airport. I'm going to dress.You turn the nursery on for a minute, Lydia, just a minute, mind you." And the three of them went babbling off while he let himself bevacuumed upstairs through the air flue and set about dressing himself. Aminute later Lydia appeared. "I'll be glad when we get away," she sighed. "Did you leave them in the nursery?" "I wanted to dress too. Oh, that horrid Africa. What can they see init?" "Well, in five minutes we'll be on our way to Iowa. Lord, how did weever get in this house? What prompted us to buy a nightmare?" "Pride, money, foolishness." "I think we'd better get downstairs before those kids get engrossedwith those damned beasts again." Just then they heard the children calling, "Daddy, Mommy, come quick -quick!" They went downstairs in the air flue and ran down the hall. Thechildren were nowhere in sight. "Wendy? Peter!" They ran into the nursery. The veldtland was empty save for the lionswaiting, looking at them. "Peter, Wendy?" The door slammed. "Wendy, Peter!" George Hadley and his wife whirled and ran back to the door. "Open the door!" cried George Hadley, trying the knob. "Why, they'velocked it from the outside! Peter!" He beat at the door. "Open up!" He heard Peter's voice outside, against the door. "Don't let them switch off the nursery and the house," he was saying. Mr. and Mrs. George Hadley beat at the door. "Now, don't be ridiculous,children. It's time to go. Mr. McClean'll be here in a minute and..." And then they heard the sounds. The lions on three sides of them, in the yellow veldt grass, paddingthrough the dry straw, rumbling and roaring in their throats. The lions. Mr. Hadley looked at his wife and they turned and looked back at thebeasts edging slowly forward crouching, tails stiff. Mr. and Mrs. Hadley screamed. And suddenly they realized why those other screams bad soundedfamiliar. "Well, here I am," said David McClean in the nursery doorway, "Oh,hello." He stared at the two children seated in the center of the open gladeeating a little picnic lunch. Beyond them was the water hole and the yellowveldtland; above was the hot sun. He began to perspire. "Where are yourfather and mother?" The children looked up and smiled. "Oh, they'll be here directly." "Good, we must get going." At a distance Mr. McClean saw the lionsfighting and clawing and then quieting down to feed in silence under theshady trees. He squinted at the lions with his hand tip to his eyes. Now the lions were done feeding. They moved to the water hole to drink. A shadow flickered over Mr. McClean's hot face. Many shadows flickered.The vultures were dropping down the blazing sky. "A cup of tea?" asked Wendy in the silence. |