

## Light and Shade

The blistering sun stands high in the clear sky, like a dead weight on all that lies below. The cracked, dry ground is baked rock hard. Stiff grasses are desiccated and pale. A stone wall marks the upper edge of the sloping field. A few short trees have the high ground.

The family are picnicking, a woven rug placed where the slope breaks slightly. The view into a deep incised valley, and across to a high ridge, from which great birds are said to soar, the reason for the choosing of this spot.

The men lie sleeping, hats across faces, while the two mothers sit and talk, their print dresses flowing from waists held tight by leather belts. One mother holds her baby up, dividing her attention between her friend and this new born. The baby wears a hat, in cheerful, coloured print. The women's hair is combed up and back, shining. Their sunglasses reflect curved views of the world. The glint of the pin-hard sun reflects and blinds.

Nearby sits the boy, six years old. He sits with legs at forty-five degrees, head bent forward. He holds a stick, and draws lines in the parched earth between his legs.

He surveys, between his straight bony legs, a triangle of earth. The sun, off the meridian, gives rise to a hard-edged shadow. Here it is hard and white, there dark and mysterious. Look from one to the other, and before the eye can adjust, simplicity itself: black and then white, white and then black.

The boy swings the tip of the stick back and forth, using it to guide his eye. A high clear laugh interrupts his rapture. He looks up and across to the women, and to his mother in particular. She holds his brother high up to the sky. The boy can remember how she had grown larger, and how she had then been gone for several days. He can remember too the day when he was then brought before her, to see that she was no longer large, and held in her arms a tiny form, that could not speak, but which seemed so very alive. He had been told that this was his new brother. He saw that all smiled, that his mother smiled, that her teeth were as white as the sheet on her bed. He was led away, and promised another visit.

It is now the middle of the day. The men sleep, while the women talk quietly, their voices unclear to the boy who sits some way off.

The tip of his stick rests on the bright sunlight portion of the ground between his legs. The boy is transfixed by the glint of the sun in the dark glasses that his mother wears. She is facing the baby, and her lips are moving. The unheard dialogue between them is endless, her mouth pursing and widening, the baby's bright lips wet and responsive in imitation.

The boy turns away, and his stick is animated once again, the tip swinging with pendulum motion, from dark to shade, casting a slim shadow as it goes. It halts, poised. Across the triangular region, a tiny movement: an ant on a diagonal trajectory. It moves by erratic darts, perhaps to confuse, but overall in one direction. It approaches the edge of the shadow region, and passes into direct sunlight. The boy jabs with the stick. The ant is crushed. The boy withdraws the stick enough, and peers at this thing that had so recently been a thing of movement. A circle in the dust is drawn. Do not go there.

Silence, except for the distant sound of dry leaves moved by a heat exhausted breeze. A moment, and then a high pitched

sound, a woman's happy voice, joined immediately by the chiming of the other. The two women laughing together, and then even the baby joining too, in imitation of the lovely cadences. The boy looks on, his face showing no expression. He sees the baby lifted and dangled, short legs swinging as if to dance.

The triangle again, and the sun has moved. The shadow area has grown, the bright illuminated region shrunk. Another ant, another passage from dark to light, another jab of the stick, and another stilling of life. Another circle to mark the spot.

Yet again, a high clear laugh interrupts the boy's rapture. He looks across, and the red slash of lipstick, and the white of his mother's teeth amaze him. He throws his stick aside and clambers up to run to her. He will have to cross a space of many yards, the sun in his face, the ground treacherously uneven. He does not care about the risk, for he runs only to her.

He reaches the half way point, and already she is closer, her face turned of course still to the baby, but closer all the same. He halves the remaining distance, and she is closer still, the white of her teeth and the glint of sunshine in her dark glasses astonishing. Still however there is a way to go. Another halving of the distance,

and the glare and brightness are enough to blind. Another half, and so near now, the sun blending with the reflected brilliance. His mother turns, sensing the approach, and smiles, white teeth revealed brilliantly. A distance yet remains, and the boy goes on, his eyes creased against the glare, his unseen feet coming down clumsily onto hard ground beneath him. Half and half again. But she turns away to face the baby once again. The boy has now to close his eyes, for the sun is far too bright and his confidence waning.

He is filled with a single thought: still so very far to go. And even then, he cannot outshine the other.

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