

ESCAPES

Stories



JOY WILLIAMS



THE ATLANTIC MONTHLY PRESS
NEW YORK

GURDJIEFF IN THE SUNSHINE STATE



THIS IS ENDLESS, G. THINKS. HE IS SITTING AT A table in the lounge area of a roller-skating rink in Florida, watching the children skate. On the table are french fries, cheese-filled pretzel logs, two chicken enchiladas and a glass of water with no ice. *How strange that I am in this place*, G. thinks. He wishes, in a way, that he were back in Atlantis, but there are so many Germans there! With those panting, slobbering dogs all trained to sniff out pharmaceuticals! *Try to enjoy Florida*, he commands himself. Outside there are oranges and pelicans and snake farms. And sharks' teeth! Impossible to walk along the beaches of Florida without picking up sharks' teeth between one's toes. Inside, he is very comfortable in the air conditioning. He wears a heavy overcoat with a tightly curled lamb's-wool collar and a Cossack cap. In his pocket are forty-seven rolls of film. *I've got to get these things developed*, G. thinks. There comes a point . . .



There are a hundred preadolescents with clear blue eyes and cute knees tearing around the rink at great speed. The preadolescents make G. feel tired. *Questions, questions, questions*, G. thinks. It's a blessing answers are not required. G. strokes his large mustache. *A baked potato is more intelligent than a raw potato*, he muses. *I think*.



G. feels a little vague. He's been thinking about the Hindus too much. He would like to go to India again but believing in the Eternal Now as he must, he's afraid of the Thugs. The British stamped out Thuggee in 1840 but that doesn't help G. The Thugs strangled travelers with scarves and threw them down wells. They did not kill everybody. There were certain restrictions. They did not strangle women or lepers or the blind or the mutilated or anyone driving a cow or stonecutters or shoemakers. G. counts these types on his fingers. He is none of these people. He shudders. *Better stay away from India*, he thinks. G. is afraid of Thugs. He also fears mud. The dreams he has about mud he wouldn't tell a living soul. *Better squash this kind of thinking*, G. decides.



G. was used to having dead people around him. He was used to admirers saying, "All the people around you seem dead." He got used to that kind of praise. No one says anything like that to him here. No one seems to notice him.



The music is deafening. Sometimes a song is played that is a little slower but no less loud than the others and the preadolescents dance to it on their roller skates. G. loves dancing. He taps his foot and strokes his mustache. The dark waters of the Tab imprisoned in the paper cup jiggle on the tabletop. *I'm in Florida!* he thinks. He loves Florida, the cold center of it. *Dance the orange*, he says enthusiastically. *Uh-oh*, he thinks. *That belongs to someone else. That German poet. Those Germans are everywhere*, he thinks with irritation. In Mexico, they were in the pyramids, in the swimming pools, in the markets buying tin lamps. In Paris, they were in the Louvre, applying Freudian theory to da Vinci, standing in front of "The Holy Family," yelling, "I see the vulture, do you see the vulture!" They were even on the Riviera, eating trout. G. has to admit, however, that they make wonderful cars. *Those BMWs*, he thinks, with a thrill of pleasure. He wishes he could dump his stupid car somewhere and get a Jaguar. *Dance the orange*, he recalls with embarrassment. He blushes but no one can tell.



Katherine Mansfield comes up to the table and sits down, gloomy as ever. He does not offer her a cigarette. She may be asleep but one never knows. No need to insult her. He smiles. *Isn't it great to be young*, he says, indicating the skaters, just making chitchat. Katherine Mansfield looks at him with consternation. *When will she cheer up!* G. sighs. He bends forward. *Impossibility is sign of truth*, he hisses. *That which can be expressed cannot be true. How many times I have to tell you that!* "I was

a writer," Katherine Mansfield says with dignity. She goes away.



G. longs for a glass of Calvados from one of those twenty-seven bottles he found covered over with a mixture of lime, sand and finely chopped straw when he was digging a pit in his cellar to preserve carrots. Gee, that would taste good. This Tab doesn't taste real. He would like a glass of Calvados and he would like one of those big rugs the Thugs made after their rehabilitation. Those men changed their lives. From stranglers, they became weavers. Oh, G. has always wanted one of those rugs! What a conversation piece!



The children are flying around like dervishes. Crazy kids. G. stares at them, absorbed, intent. His jaw begins to ache. He lights a cigarette, smokes, coughs, yawns, laughs. Jesus never laughed. *Poor guy*, G. thinks. A small boy in silk shorts, a shirt covered with arcane lettering and black roller skates with huge green wheels floats up to the wall and crashes into it. G. laughs. *I know what that feels like*, he thinks. *That tree outside Fontainebleau did not move one inch. Be careful*, he shouts to the small boy, laughing. *Or you'll be like me, a bit of live meat in a clean bed*. He is asked to leave.



G. walks along the beach. *What I need is to get into the ocean*, he thinks. But there is only the Gulf. He's taking it all in. *I'm*

in Florida! he thinks. His great shaven dome gleams in the sun. He approaches the water, swishes his right foot in it. It's tepid, the water. *I'm not being spontaneous enough*, G. worries. *I should just run right in, catch a wave, bodysurf back out. Or maybe I should just do a little skim-boarding in the shallows*. Under his overcoat he wears a pair of red shorts, not Nantucket reds but close to the color of Nantucket reds. When G.'s granny was dying, she said to G.: *In Life Never Do As Others Do*. On her deathbed, her last words, imagine! Saying that to a little kid.



G. sits on the shore. It is January, G. was born in January. It's getting dark. *Uh-oh*, G. thinks. Down the beach comes a black carriage drawn by an old horse guided by a drunken coachman. *This is very familiar*, G. thinks. His dark eyes glitter as he regards the spectacle. Everything is exactly right. The coachman is ignorant and disheveled, the horse is mistreated and spiritless, the carriage is in need of repair. *An exact cosmic actualization of my most favorite metaphor*, G. exclaims with delight. *Here!* The carriage stops in front of G. There is *no way* G. is going to get into that carriage. Nonchalantly, he bends down and picks up a little piece of coral and sails it out over the water. *Plip Plip Plip Plip PlipPlipPlip* it goes. Cursing, the coachman urges his horse onward. The horse doesn't move. The coachman climbs down from the carriage and starts beating the horse, punching him in the neck, kicking him in the ribs. Suddenly a German rushes out from behind a clump of sea oats and stays the violent coachman's hand. It is Nietzsche, Friedrich Nietzsche! He throws his arms around the horse's head and goes insane on the spot. No question about it, completely insane. He is taken off, babbling, in the broken-down carriage. G. looks

JOY WILLIAMS

after them, startled, but then remembers that it is January. *Nice forehead*, he has to admit. G. is alone once more on the darkening shore. Completely alone. But nothing has been lost. Nothing.

BROMELIADS



JONES'S GRANDCHILD IS EIGHT DAYS OLD. HE AND his wife have not been sent a picture of the baby and although they have spoken with their daughter several times on the telephone they do not have a very good idea of what the child looks like. It seems very difficult to describe a new baby. Jones has seen quite a few new babies in his years of serving a congregation and he has held them and gazed into their large sweet eyes. These experiences, however, cannot help him picture *this* child, his only grandchild, this harmonious and sweet thought that he carries in his mind, green and graceful as a fern.

Jones and his wife had no idea that their daughter was going to have a baby. They had seen her six months ago and she had mentioned nothing about a baby. Several days after the birth, her husband had called them with the news.

Jones lies awake in the night, troubled by this. His wife