

Kurt Vonnegut

Bagombo Snuff Box

This place is new, isn't it?" said Eddie Laird.

He was sitting in a bar in the heart of the city. He was the only customer, and he was talking to the bartender.

"I don't remember this place," he said, "and I used to know every bar in town."

Laird was a big man, thirty-three, with a pleasantly impudent moon face. He was dressed in a blue flannel suit that was plainly a very recent purchase. He watched his image in the bar mirror as he talked. Now and then, one of his hands would stray from the glass to stroke a soft lapel.

"Not so new," said the bartender, a sleepy, fat man in his fifties. "When was the last time you were in town?"

"The war," Laird said.

"Which war was that?"

"Which war?" Laird repeated. "I guess you have to ask people that nowadays, when they talk about war. The second one—the Second World War. I was stationed out at Cunningham Field. Used to come to town every weekend I could."

A sweet sadness welled up in him as he remembered his reflection in other bar mirrors in other days, remembered the reflected flash of captain's bars and silver wings.

"This place was built in 'forty-six, and been renovated twice since then," the bartender said.

"Built—and renovated twice," Laird said wonderingly. "Things wear out pretty fast these days, don't they? Can you still get a plank steak at Charley's Steak House for two dollars?"

"Burned down," the bartender said. "There's a J. C. Penney there now."

"So what's the big Air Force hangout these days?" Laird said.

"Isn't one," the bartender said. "They closed down Cunningham Field."

Laird picked up his drink, and walked over to the window to watch the people go by. "I halfway expected the women here to be wearing short skirts still," he said. "Where are all the pretty pink knees?" He rattled his fingernails against the window. A woman glanced at him and hurried on.

"I've got a wife out there somewhere," Laird said. "What do you suppose has happened to *her* in eleven years?"

"A wife?"

"An ex-wife. One of those war things. I was twenty-two, and she was eighteen. Lasted six months."

"What went wrong?"

"Wrong?" Laird said. "I just didn't want to be owned, that

all. I wanted to be able to stick my toothbrush in my hip pocket and take off whenever I felt like it. And she didn't go for that. So . . ." He grinned. "Adiós. No tears, no hard feelings."

He walked over to the jukebox. "What's the most frantically popular song of the minute?"

"Try number seventeen," the bartender said. "I guess I could stand it one more time."

Laird played number seventeen, a loud, tearful ballad of lost love. He listened intently. And at the end, he stamped his foot and winked, just as he had done years before.

"One more drink," Laird said, "and then, by heaven, I'm going to call up my ex-wife." He appealed to the bartender. "That's all right, isn't it? Can't I call her up if I want to?" He laughed. "'Dear Emily Post: I have a slight problem in etiquette. I haven't seen or exchanged a word with my ex-wife for eleven years. Now I find myself in the same city with her—'"

"How do you know she's still around?" the bartender said.

"I called up an old buddy when I blew in this morning. He said she's all set—got just what she wants: a wage slave of a husband, a vine-covered cottage with expansion attic, two kids, and a quarter of an acre of lawn as green as Arlington National Cemetery."

Laird strode to the telephone. For the fourth time that day, he looked up his ex-wife's number, under the name of her second husband, and held a dime an inch above the slot. This time, he let the coin fall. "Here goes nothing," Laird said. He dialed.

A woman answered. In the background, a child shrieked and a radio blabbed.

"Amy?" Laird said.

"Yes?" She was out of breath.

A silly grin spread over Laird's face. "Hey—guess what? This is Eddie Laird."

"Who?"

"Eddie Laird—Eddie!"

"Wait a minute, would you, please?" Amy said. "The baby is making such a terrible racket, and the radio's on, and I've got brownies in the oven, just ready to come out. I can't hear a thing. Would you hold on?"

"Sure."

"Now then," she said, winded, "who did you say this was?"

"Eddie Laird."

She gasped. "Really?"

"Really," Laird said merrily. "I just blew in from Ceylon, by way of Baghdad, Rome, and New York."

"Good heavens," said Amy. "What a shock. I didn't even know if you were alive or dead."

Laird laughed. "They can't kill me, and by heaven, they've sure tried."

"What have you been up to?"

"Ohhhhh—a little bit of everything. I just quit a job flying for a pearling outfit in Ceylon. I'm starting a company of my own, prospecting for uranium up around the Klondike region. Before the Ceylon deal, I was hunting diamonds in the Amazon rain forest, and before that, flying for a sheik in Iraq."

"Like something out of *The Arabian Nights*," said Amy. "My head just swims."

"Well, don't get any glamorous illusions," Laird said. "Most of it was hard, dirty, dangerous work." He sighed. "And how about you, Amy?"

"Me?" said Amy. "How is any housewife? Harassed."

The child began to cry again.

"Amy," said Laird huskily, "is everything all right—between us?"

Her voice was very small. "Time heals all wounds," she said. "It hurt at first, Eddie—it hurt very much. But I've come to understand it was all for the best. You can't help being restless. You were born that way. You were like a caged eagle, mooning, molting."

"And you, Amy, are you happy?"

"Very," said Amy, with all her heart. "It's wild and it's messy with the children. But when I get a chance to catch my breath, I can see it's sweet and good. It's what I always wanted. So in the end, we both got our way, didn't we? The eagle and the homing pigeon."

"Amy," Laird said, "could I come out to see you?"

"Oh, Eddie, the house is a horror and I'm a witch. I couldn't stand to have you see me like this—after you've come from Ceylon by way of Baghdad, Rome, and New York. What a hideous letdown for someone like you. Stevie had the measles last week, and the baby has had Harry and me up three times a night, and—"

"Now, now," Laird said, "I'll see the real you shining through it all. I'll come out at five, and say hello, and leave again right away. Please?"

On the cab ride out to Amy's home, Laird encouraged himself to feel sentimental about the coming reunion. He tried to daydream about the best of his days with her, but got only fantasies of movie starlet-like nymphs dancing about him with red lips and vacant eyes. This shortcoming of his imagination, like

everything else about the day, was a throwback to his salad days in the Air Force. All pretty women had seemed to come from the same mold.

Laird told the cab to wait for him. "This will be short and sweet," he said.

As he walked up to Amy's small, ordinary house, he managed a smile of sad maturity, the smile of a man who has hurt and been hurt, who has seen everything, who has learned a great deal from it all, and who, incidentally, has made a lot of money along the way.

He knocked and, while he waited, picked at the flaking paint on the door frame.

Harry, Amy's husband, a blocky man with a kind face, invited Larry in.

"I'm changing the baby," Amy called from inside. "Be there in two shakes."

Harry was clearly startled by Laird's size and splendor, and Laird looked down on him and clapped his arm in comradely fashion.

"I guess a lot of people would say this is pretty irregular," Laird said. "But what happened between Amy and me was a long time ago. We were just a couple of crazy kids, and we're all older and wiser now. I hope we can all be friends."

Harry nodded. "Why, yes, of course. Why not?" he said. "Would you like something to drink? I'm afraid I don't have much of a selection. Rye or beer?"

"Anything at all, Harry," Laird said. "I've had kava with the Maoris, scotch with the British, champagne with the French and cacao with the Tupi. I'll have a rye or a beer with you. When in Rome . . ." He dipped into his pocket and brought out a snuff box encrusted with semiprecious gems. "Say, I brought

you and Amy a little something." He pressed the box into Harry's hand. "I picked it up for a song in Bagombo."

"Bagombo?" said Harry, dazzled.

"Ceylon," Laird said easily. "Flew for a pearling outfit out there. Pay was fantastic, the mean temperature was seventy-three, but I didn't like the monsoons. Couldn't stand being bottled up in the same rooms for weeks at a time, waiting for the rain to quit. A man's got to get out, or he just goes to pot—gets flabby and womanly."

"Um," said Harry.

Already the small house and the smells of cooking and the clutter of family life were crowding in on Laird, making him want to be off and away. "Nice place you have here," he said.

"It's a little small," Harry said. "But—"

"Cozy," said Laird. "Too much room can drive you nuts. I know. Back in Bagombo, I had twenty-six rooms, and twelve servants to look after them, but they didn't make me happy. They mocked me, actually. But the place rented for seven dollars a month, and I couldn't pass it up, could I?"

Harry started to leave for the kitchen, but stopped in the doorway, thunderstruck. "Seven dollars a month for twenty-six rooms?" he said.

"Turned out I was being taken. The tenant before me got it for three."

"Three," Harry murmured. "Tell me," he said hesitantly, "are there a lot of jobs waiting for Americans in places like that? Are they recruiting?"

"You wouldn't want to leave your family, would you?"

Harry was conscience-stricken. "Oh, no! I thought maybe I could take them."

"No soap," said Laird. "What they want is bachelors. And

anyway, you've got a nice setup here. And you've got to have a specialty, too, to qualify for the big money. Fly, handle a boat, speak a language. Besides, most of the recruiting is done in bars in Singapore, Algiers, and places like that. Now, I'm taking a flier at uranium prospecting on my own, up in the Klondike, and I need a couple of good Geiger counter technicians. Can you repair a Geiger counter, Harry?"

"Nope," said Harry.

"Well, the men I want are going to have to be single, anyway," said Laird. "It's a beautiful part of the world, teeming with moose and salmon, but rugged. No place for women or children. What is your line?"

"Oh," said Harry, "credit manager for a department store."

"Harry," Amy called, "would you please warm up the baby's formula, and see if the lima beans are done?"

"Yes, dear," said Harry.

"What did you say, honey?"

"I said yes!" Harry bellowed.

A shocked silence settled over the house.

And then Amy came in, and Laird had his memory refreshed. Laird stood. Amy was a lovely woman, with black hair, and wise brown affectionate eyes. She was still young, but obviously very tired. She was prettily dressed, carefully made-up, and quite self-conscious.

"Eddie, how nice," she said with brittle cheerfulness. "Don't you look well!"

"You, too," Laird said.

"Do I really?" Amy said. "I feel so ancient."

"You shouldn't," Laird said. "This life obviously agrees with you."

"We *have* been very happy," Amy said.

"You're as pretty as a model in Paris, a movie star in Rome."

"You don't mean it." Amy was pleased.

"I do," Laird said. "I can see you now in a Mainbocher suit, your high heels clicking smartly along the Champs-Élysées, with the soft winds of the Parisian spring ruffling your black hair, and with every eye drinking you in—and a gendarme salutes!"

"Oh, Eddie!" Amy cried.

"Have you been to Paris?" said Laird.

"Nope," said Amy.

"No matter. In many ways, there are more exotic thrills in New York. I can see you there, in a theater crowd, with each man falling silent and turning to stare as you pass by. When was the last time you were in New York?"

"Hmmmmm?" Amy said, staring into the distance.

"When were you last in New York?"

"Oh, I've never been there. Harry has—on business."

"Why didn't he take you?" Laird said gallantly. "You can't let your youth slip away without going to New York. It's a young person's town."

"Angel," Harry called from the kitchen, "how can you tell if lima beans are done?"

"Stick a lousy fork into 'em!" Amy yelled.

Harry appeared in the doorway with drinks, and blinked in hurt bewilderment. "Do you have to yell at me?" he said.

Amy rubbed her eyes. "I'm sorry," she said. "I'm tired. We're both tired."

"We haven't had much sleep," Harry said. He patted his wife's back. "We're both a little tense."

Amy took her husband's hand and squeezed it. Peace settled over the house once more.

Harry passed out the drinks, and Laird proposed a toast.

"Eat, drink, and be merry," Laird said, "for tomorrow we could die."

Harry and Amy winced, and drank thirstily.

"He brought us a snuff box from Bagombo, honey," said Harry. "Did I pronounce that right?"

"You've Americanized it a little," said Laird. "But that's about it." He pursed his lips. "Bagombo."

"It's very pretty," said Amy. "I'll put it on my dressing table, and not let the children near it. Bagombo."

"There!" Laird said. "She said it just right. It's a funny thing. Some people have an ear for languages. They hear them once, and they catch all the subtle sounds immediately. And some people have a tin ear, and never catch on. Amy, listen, and then repeat what I say: *Toli! Pakka sahn nebul rokka ta. Si notte loni gin ta tonic.*"

Cautiously Amy repeated the sentence.

"Perfect! You know what you just said in Buhna-Simca? 'Young woman, go cover the baby, and bring me a gin and tonic on the south terrace.' Now then, Harry, you say, *Pilla! Sibba tu bang-bang. Libbin hru donna steek!*"

Harry, frowning, repeated the sentence.

Laird sat back with a sympathetic smile for Amy. "Well, I don't know, Harry. That might get across, except you'd earn a laugh from the natives when you turned your back."

Harry was stung. "What did I say?"

"Boy!" Laird translated. "Hand me the gun. The tiger is in the clump of trees just ahead."

"Pilla!" Harry said imperiously. "*Sibba tu bang-bang. Libbin hru donna steek!*" He held out his hand for the gun, and the hand twitched like a fish dying on a riverbank.

"Better—much better!" Laird said.

"That was good," Amy said.

Harry brushed off their adulation. He was grim, purposeful. "Tell me," he said, "are tigers a problem around Bagombo?"

"Sometimes, when game gets scarce in the jungles, tigers come into the outskirts of villages," Laird said. "And then you have to go out and get them."

"You had servants in Bagombo, did you?" Amy said.

"At six cents a day for a man, and four cents a day for a woman? I guess!" Laird said.

There was the sound of a bicycle bumping against the outside of the house.

"Stevie's home," Harry said.

"I want to go to Bagombo," Amy said.

"It's no place to raise kids," Laird said. "That's the big drawback."

The front door opened, and a good-looking, muscular nine-year-old boy came in, hot and sweaty. He threw his cap at a hook in the front closet and started upstairs.

"Hang up your hat, Stevie!" Amy said. "I'm not a servant who follows you around, gathering things wherever you care to throw them."

"And pick up your feet!" said Harry.

Stevie came creeping down the stairway, shocked and perplexed. "What got into you two all of a sudden?" he said.

"Don't be fresh," Harry said. "Come in here and meet Mr. Laird."

"Major Laird," said Laird.

"Hi," said Stevie. "How come you haven't got a uniform on, if you're a Major?"

"Reserve commission," Laird said. The boy's eyes, frank, irreverent, and unromantic, scared him. "Nice boy you have here."

"Oh," Stevie said, "that kind of a Major." He saw the snuff box, and picked it up.

"Stevie," Amy said, "put that down. It's one of Mother's treasures, and it's not going to get broken like everything else. Put it down."

"Okay, okay, okay," said Stevie. He set the box down with elaborate gentleness. "I didn't know it was such a treasure."

"Major Laird brought it all the way from Bagombo," Amy said.

"Bagombo, Japan?" Stevie said.

"Ceylon, Stevie," Harry said. "Bagombo is in Ceylon."

"Then how come it's got 'Made in Japan' on the bottom?"

Laird paled. "They export their stuff to Japan, and the Japanese market it for them," he said.

"There, Stevie," Amy said. "You learned something today."

"Then why don't they say it was made in Ceylon?" Stevie wanted to know.

"The Oriental mind works in devious ways," said Harry.

"Exactly," said Laird. "You've caught the whole spirit of the Orient in that one sentence, Harry."

"They ship these things all the way from Africa to Japan?" Stevie asked.

A hideous doubt stabbed Laird. A map of the world swirled in

his mind, with continents flapping and changing shape and with an island named Ceylon scuttling through the seven seas. Only two points held firm, and these were Stevie's irreverent blue eyes.

"I always thought it was off India," Amy said.

"It's funny how things leave you when you start thinking about them too hard," Harry said. "Now I've got Ceylon all balled up with Madagascar."

"And Sumatra and Borneo," Amy said. "That's what we get for never leaving home."

Now four islands were sailing the troubled seas in Laird's mind.

"What's the answer, Eddie?" Amy said. "Where is Ceylon?"

"It's an island off Africa," Stevie said firmly. "We studied it."

Laird looked around the room and saw doubt on every face but Stevie's. He cleared his throat. "The boy is right," he croaked.

"I'll get my atlas and show you," Stevie said with pride, and ran upstairs.

Laird stood up, weak. "Must dash."

"So soon?" Harry said. "Well, I hope you find lots of uranium." He avoided his wife's eyes. "I'd give my right arm to go with you."

"Someday, when the children are grown," Amy said, "maybe we'll still be young enough to enjoy New York and Paris, and all those other places—and maybe retire in Bagombo."

"I hope so," said Laird. He blundered out the door, and down the walk, which now seemed endless, and into the waiting taxicab. "Let's go," he told the driver.

"They're all yelling at you," said the driver. He rolled down his window so Laird could hear.