

Hopscotch, Ray Bradbury

Hopscotch

Vinia woke to the sound of a rabbit running down and across an endless moonlit field; but it was only the soft, quick beating of her heart. She lay on the bed for a moment, getting her breath.

Now the sound of the running faded and was gone at a great distance. At last she sat up and looked down from her second-story bedroom window and there below, on the long sidewalk, in the faint moonlight before dawn, was the hopscotch.

Late yesterday, some child had chalked it out, immense and endlessly augmented, square upon square, line after line, numeral following numeral. You could not see the end of it. Down the street it built its crazy pattern, 3, 4, 5, on up to 10, then 30, 50, 90, on away to turn far corners. Never in all the children's world a hopscotch like this! You could jump forever toward the horizon.

Now in the very early, very quiet morning, her eyes traveled and jumped, paused and hopped, along that presumptuous ladder of chalk-scratches and she heard herself whisper:
"Sixteen."

But she did not run on from there.

The next square waited, she knew, with the scribbled blue-chalk 17, but her mind flung out its arms and balanced, teetering, poised with her numb foot planted across the 1 and the 6, and could go no farther.

Trembling, she lay back down.

The room was like the bottom of a cool well all night and she lay in it like a white stone in a well, enjoying it, floating in the dark yet clear element of half dreams and half wakening.

She felt the breath move in small jets from her nostrils and she felt the immense sweep of her eyelids shutting and opening again and again. And at last she felt the fever brought into her room by the presence of the sun beyond the hills.

Morning, she thought. It might be a special day. After all, it's my birthday. Anything might happen. And I hope it does. The air moved the white curtains like a summer breath.

"Vinia . . . ?"

A voice was calling. But it couldn't be a voice. Yet—Vinia raised herself—there it was again.

"Vinia . . . ?"

She slipped from bed and ran to the window of her high second-story window.

There on the fresh lawn below, calling up to her in the early hour, stood James Conway, no older than she, seventeen, very seriously smiling, waving his hand now as her head appeared.

"Jim, what're you doing here?" she said, and thought, Does he know what day this is?

"I've been up an hour already," he replied. "I'm going for a walk, starting early, all day. Want to come along?"

"Oh, but I couldn't . . . my folks won't be back till late tonight, I'm alone, I'm supposed to stay . . ."

She saw the green hills beyond the town and the roads leading out into summer, leading out into August and rivers and places beyond this town and this house and this room and this particular moment.

"I can't go . . ." she said faintly.

"I can't hear you!" he protested mildly, smiling up at her under a shielding hand.

“Why did you ask me to walk with you, and not someone else?”

He considered this for a moment. “I don’t know,” he admitted. He thought it over again, and gave her his most pleasant and agreeable look. “Because, that’s all, just because.”

“I’ll be down,” she said.

“Hey!” he said.

But the window was empty.

They stood in the center of the perfect, jeweled lawn, over which one set of prints, hers, had run, leaving marks, and another, his, had walked in great slow strides to meet them. The town was silent as a stopped clock. All the shades were still down.

“My gosh,” said Vinia, “it’s early. It’s crazy-early. I’ve never been up this early and out this early in years. Listen to everyone sleeping.”

They listened to the trees and the whiteness of the houses in this early whispering hour, the hour when mice went back to sleep and flowers began untightening their bright fists.

“Which way do we go?”

“Pick a direction.”

Vinia closed her eyes, whirled, and pointed blindly.

“Which way am I pointing?”

“North.”

She opened her eyes. “Let’s go north out of town, then. I don’t suppose we should.”

“Why?”

And they walked out of town as the sun rose above the hills and the grass burned greener on the lawns.

There was a smell of hot chalk highway, of dust and sky and waters flowing in a creek the color of grapes. The sun was a new lemon. The forest lay ahead with shadows stirring like a million birds under each tree, each bird a leaf-darkness, trembling.

At noon, Vinia and James Conway had crossed vast meadows that sounded brisk and starched underfoot. The day had grown warm, as an iced glass of tea grows warm, the frost burning off, left in the sun.

They picked a handful of grapes from a wild barbed-wire vine. Holding them up to the sun, you could see the clear grape thoughts suspended in the dark amber fluid, the little hot seeds of contemplation stored from many afternoons of solitude and plant philosophy. The grapes tasted of fresh, clear water and something that they had saved from the morning dews and the evening rains.

They were the warmed-over flesh of April ready now, in August, to pass on their simple gain to any passing stranger. And the lesson was this; sit in the sun, head down, within a prickly vine, in flickery light or open light, and the world will come to you. The sky will come in its time, bringing rain, and the earth will rise through you, from beneath, and make you rich and make you full.

“Have a grape,” said James Conway. “Have two.”
They munched their wet, full mouths.

They sat on the edge of a brook and took off their shoes and let the water cut their feet off to the ankles with an exquisite cold razor.

My feet are gone! thought Vinia. But when she looked, there they were, underwater, living comfortably apart from her, completely acclimated to an amphibious existence.

They ate egg sandwiches Jim had brought with him in a paper sack.

“Vinia,” said Jim, looking at his sandwich before he bit it. “Would you mind if I kissed you?”

“I don’t know,” she said, after a moment. “I hadn’t thought.”

“Will you think it over?” he asked.

“Did we come on this picnic just so you could kiss me?” she asked suddenly.

“Oh, don’t get me wrong! It’s been a swell day! I don’t want to spoil it. But if you should decide, later, that it’s all right for me to kiss you, would you tell me?”

“I’ll tell you,” she said, starting on her second sandwich, “if I ever decide.”

The rain came as a cool surprise.

It smelled of soda water and limes and oranges and the cleanest, freshest river in the world, made of snow-water, falling from the high, parched sky.

First there had been a motion, as of veils, in the sky. The clouds had enveloped each other softly. A faint breeze had lifted Vinia’s hair, sighing and evaporating the moisture from her upper lip, and then, as she and Jim began to run, the raindrops fell down all about without touching them and then at last began to touch them, coolly, as they leaped green-moss logs and darted among vast trees into the deepest, muskiest cavern of the forest. The forest sprang up in wet murmurs overhead, every leaf ringing and painted fresh with water.

“This way!” cried Jim.

And they reached a hollow tree so vast that they could squeeze in and be warmly cozy from the rain. They stood together, arms about each other, the first coldness from the rain making them shiver, raindrops on their noses and cheeks, laughing. “Hey!” He gave her brow a lick.

“Drinking water!”

“Jim!”

They listened to the rain, the soft envelopment of the world in the velvet clearness of falling water, the whispers in deep grass, evoking odors of old, wet wood and leaves that had lain a hundred years, moldering and sweet.

Then they heard another sound. Above and inside the hollow warm darkness of the tree was a constant humming, like someone in a kitchen, far away, baking and crusting pies contentedly, dipping in sweet sugars and snowing in baking powders, someone in a warm, dim, summer-rainy kitchen making a vast supply of food, happy at it, humming between lips over it.

“Bees, Jim, up there! Bees!”

“Shh!”

Up the channel of moist, warm hollow they saw little yellow flickers. Now the last bees, wettened, were hurrying home from whatever pasture or meadow or field they had covered, dipping by Vinia and Jim, vanishing up the warm flue of summer into hollow dark.

“They won’t bother us. Just stand still.”

Jim tightened his arms; Vinia tightened hers. She could smell his breath with the wild tart grapes still on it. And the harder the rain drummed on the tree, the tighter they held, laughing, at last quietly letting their laughter drain away into the sound of the bees home from the far fields.

And for a moment, Vinia thought that she and Jim might be caught by a sudden drop of great masses of honey from above, sealing them into this tree forever, enchanted, in amber, to be seen by anyone in the next thousand years who strolled by, while the weather of all ages rained and thundered and turned green outside the tree.

It was so warm, so safe, so protected here, the world did not exist, there was raining silence, in the sunless, forested day.

“Vinia,” whispered Jim, after a while. “May I now?”

His face was very large, near her, larger than any face she had ever seen.

“Yes,” she said.

He kissed her.

The rain poured hard on the tree for a full minute while everything was cold outside and everything was tree-warmth and hidden away inside.

It was a very sweet kiss. It was very friendly and comfortably warm and it tasted like apricots and fresh apples and as water tastes when you rise at night and walk into a dark, warm summer kitchen and drink from a cool tin cup.

She had never imagined that a kiss could be so sweet and immensely tender and careful of her. He held her not as he had held her a moment before, hard, to protect her from the green rain weather, but he held her now as if she were a porcelain clock, very carefully and with consideration. His eyes were closed and the lashes were glistening dark; she saw this in the instant she opened her eyes and closed them again.

The rain stopped.

It was a moment before the new silence shocked them into an awareness of the climate beyond their world. Now there was nothing but the suspension of water in all the intricate branches of the forest. Clouds moved away to show the blue sky in great quilted patches.

They looked out at the change with some dismay. They waited for the rain to come back, to keep them, by necessity, in this hollow tree for another minute or an hour. But the sun appeared, shining through upon everything, making the scene quite commonplace again.

They stepped from the hollow tree slowly and stood with their hands out, balancing, finding their way, it seemed, in these woods where the water was drying fast on every limb and leaf.

“I think we’d better start walking,” said Vinia. “That way.”

They walked off into the summer afternoon.

They crossed the town limits at sunset and walked hand in hand in the last glowing of the summer day. They had talked very little the rest of

the afternoon, and now as they turned down one street after another, they looked at the passing sidewalk under their feet.

“Vinia,” he said at last. “Do you think this is the beginning of something?”

“Oh, gosh, Jim, I don’t know.”

“Do you think maybe we’re in love?”

“Oh, I don’t know that either!”

They passed down into the ravine and over the bridge and up the other side to her street.

“Do you think we’ll ever be married?”

“It’s too early to tell, isn’t it?” she said.

“I guess you’re right.” He bit his lip. “Will we go walking again soon?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know. Let’s wait and see, Jim.”

The house was dark, her parents not home yet. They stood on her porch and she shook his hand gravely.

“Thanks, Jim, for a really fine day,” she said.

“You’re welcome,” he said.

They stood there.

Then he turned and walked down the steps and across the dark lawn. At the far edge of lawn he stopped in the shadows and said, “Good night.”

He was almost out of sight, running, when she, in turn, said good night.

In the middle of the night, a sound wakened her.

She half sat up in bed, trying to hear it again. The folks were home, everything was locked and secure, but it hadn’t been them. No, this was a special sound. And lying there, looking out at the summer night that had, not long ago, been a summer day, she heard the sound again, and it was a sound of hollowing warmth and moist bark and empty, tunneled tree, the rain outside but comfortable dryness and secretness

inside, and it was the sound of bees come home from distant fields, moving upward in the flue of summer into wonderful darkness.

And this sound, she realized, putting her hand up in the summer-night room to touch it, was coming from her drowsy, half-smiling mouth.

Which made her sit bolt upright, and very quietly move downstairs, out through the door, onto the porch, and across the wet-grass lawn to the sidewalk, where the crazed hopscotch chalked itself way off into the future.

Her bare feet hit the first numbers, leaving moist prints up to 10 and 12, thumping, until she stopped at 16, staring down at 17, hesitating, swaying. Then she gritted her teeth, made fists, reared back, and . . .

Jumped right in the middle of the square 17.

She stood there for a long moment, eyes shut, seeing how it felt.

Then she ran upstairs and lay out on the bed and touched her mouth to see if a summer afternoon was breathing out of it, and listening for that drowsy hum, the golden sound, and it was there.

And it was this sound, eventually, which sang her to sleep.

The End