

# The Cistern, Ray Bradbury

## The Cistern

It was an afternoon of rain, and lamps lighted against the gray. For a long while the two sisters had been in the dining room. One of them, Juliet, embroidered tablecloths; the younger, Anna, sat quietly on the window seat, staring out at the dark street and the dark sky.

Anna kept her brow pressed against the pane, but her lips moved and after reflecting a long moment, she said, "I never thought of that before."

"Of what?" asked Juliet.

"It just came to me. There's actually a city under a city. A dead city, right here, right under our feet."

Juliet poked her needle in and out the white cloth. "Come away from the window. That rain's done something to you."

"No, really. Didn't you ever think of the cisterns before? They're all through the town, there's one for every street, and you can walk in them without bumping your head, and they go everywhere and finally go down to the sea," said Anna, fascinated with the rain on the asphalt pavement out there and the rain falling from the sky and vanishing down the gratings at each corner of the distant intersection. "Wouldn't you like to live in a cistern?"

"I would not!"

"But wouldn't it be fun—I mean, very secret? To live in the cistern and peek up at people through the slots and see them and them not see you? Like when you were a child and played hide-and-seek and nobody found you, and there you were in their midst all the time, all sheltered and hidden and warm and excited. I'd like that. That's what it must be like to live in the cistern."

Juliet looked slowly up from her work. "You are my sister, aren't you, Anna? You were born, weren't you? Sometimes, the way you talk, I think Mother found you under a tree one day and brought you home and planted you in a pot and grew you to this size and there you are, and you'll never change."

Anna didn't reply, so Juliet went back to her needle. There was no color in the room; neither of the two sisters added any color to it. Anna held her head to the window for five minutes. Then she looked way off into the distance and said, "I guess you'd call it a dream. While I've been here, the last hour, I mean. Thinking. Yes, Juliet, it was a dream." Now it was Juliet's turn not to answer.

Anna whispered. "All this water put me to sleep a while, I guess, and then I began to think about the rain and where it came from and where it went and how it went down those little slots in the curb, and then I thought about deep under, and suddenly there they were. A man . . . and a woman. Down in that cistern, under the road."

"What would they be doing there?" asked Juliet.  
Anna said, "Must they have a reason?"

"No, not if they're insane, no," said Juliet. "In that case no reasons are necessary. There they are in their cistern, and let them stay."

"But they aren't just in the cistern," said Anna, knowingly, her head to one side, her eyes moving under the half-down lids. "No, they're in love, these two."

"For heaven's sake," said Juliet, "did love make them crawl down there?"

"No, they've been there for years and years," said Anna.

"You can't tell me they've been in that cistern for years, living together," protested Juliet.

"Did I say they were alive?" asked Anna, surprised. "Oh, but no. They're dead."

The rain scrambled in wild, pushing pellets down the window. Drops came and joined with others and made streaks.

“Oh,” said Juliet.

“Yes,” said Anna, pleasantly. “Dead. He’s dead and she’s dead.” This seemed to satisfy her; it was a nice discovery, and she was proud of it.

“He looks like a very lonely man who never traveled in all his life.”

“How do you know?”

“He looks like the kind of man who never traveled but wanted to. You know by his eyes.”

“You know what he looks like, then?”

“Yes. Very ill and very handsome. You know how it is with a man made handsome by illness? Illness brings out the bones in the face.”

“And he’s dead?” asked the older sister.

“For five years.” Anna talked softly, with her eyelids rising and falling, as if she were about to tell a long story and knew it and wanted to work into it slowly, and then faster and then faster, until the very momentum of the story would carry her on, with her eyes wide and her lips parted. But now it was slowly, with only a slight fever to the telling.

“Five years ago this man was walking along a street and he knew he’d been walking the same street on many nights and he’d go on walking it, so he came to a manhole cover, one of those big iron waffles in the center of the street, and he heard the river rushing under his feet, under the metal cover, rushing toward the sea.” Anna put out her right hand.

“And he bent slowly and lifted up the cistern lid and looked down at the rushing foam and the water, and he thought of someone he wanted to love and couldn’t, and then he swung himself onto the iron rungs and walked down them until he was all gone. . . .”

“And what about her?” asked Juliet, busy. “When’d she die?”

“I’m not sure. She’s new. She’s just dead, now. But she is dead. Beautifully, beautifully dead.” Anna admired the image she had in her mind. “It takes death to make a woman really beautiful, and it takes death by drowning to make her most beautiful of all.

Then all the stiffness is taken out of her, and her hair hangs up on the water like a drift of smoke.” She nodded her head, amusedly. “All the schools and etiquettes and teachings in the world can’t make a woman move with this dreamy ease, supple and ripply and fine.” Anna tried to show how fine, how ripply, how graceful, with her broad, coarse hand.

“He’d been waiting for her, for five years. But she hadn’t known where he was till now. So there they are, and will be, from now on. . . . In the rainy season they’ll live. But in the dry seasons—that’s sometimes months—they’ll have long rest periods, they’ll lie in little hidden niches, like those Japanese water flowers, all dry and compact and old and quiet.”

Juliet got up and turned on yet another little lamp in the corner of the dining room. “I wish you wouldn’t talk about it.”

Anna laughed. “But let me tell you about how it starts, how they come back to life. I’ve got it all worked out.” She bent forward, held onto her knees, staring at the street and the rain and the cistern mouths.

“There they are, down under dry and quiet, and up above the sky gets electrical and powdery.” She threw back her dull, graying hair with one hand. “At first all the upper world is pellets. Then there’s lightning and then thunder and the dry season is over, and the little pellets run along the gutters and get big and fall into the drains. They take gum wrappers and theater tickets with them, and bus transfers!”

“Come away from that window, now.”

Anna made a square with her hands and imagined things. “I know just what it’s like under the pavement, in the big square cistern. It’s huge. It’s all empty from the weeks with nothing but sunshine. It echoes if you talk. The only sound you can hear standing down there is an auto

passing above. Far up above. The whole cistern is like a dry, hollow camel bone in a desert, waiting.”

She lifted her hand, pointing, as if she herself were down in the cistern, waiting. “Now, a little trickle. It comes down on the floor. It’s like something was hurt and bleeding up in the outer world. There’s some thunder! Or was it a truck going by?”

She spoke a little more rapidly now, but held her body relaxed against the window, breathing out, and in the next words: “It seeps down. Then, into all the other hollows come other seepages. Little twines and snakes.

Tobacco-stained water. Then it moves. It joins others. It makes snakes and then one big constrictor which rolls along on the flat, papered floor. From everywhere, from the north and south, from other streets, other streams come and they join and make one hissing and shining coil. And the water writhes into those two little dry niches I told you about. It rises slowly around those two, the man and the woman, lying there like Japanese flowers.”

She clasped her hands, slowly, working finger into finger, interlacing.

“The water soaks into them. First, it lifts the woman’s hand. In a little move. Her hand’s the only live part of her. Then her arm lifts and one foot. And her hair . . .” she touched her own hair as it hung about her shoulders “. . . unloosens and opens out like a flower in the water. Her shut eyelids are blue. . . .”

The room got darker, Juliet sewed on, and Anna talked and told all she saw in her mind. She told how the water rose and took the woman with it, unfolding her out and loosening her and standing her full upright in the cistern. “The water is interested in the woman, and she lets it have its way. After a long time of lying still, she’s ready to live again, any life the water wants her to have.”

Somewhere else, the man stood up in the water also. And Anna told of that, and how the water carried him slowly, drifting, and her, drifting, until they met each other. “The water opens their eyes. Now they can see but not see each other. They circle, not touching yet.” Anna made a little move of her head, eyes closed. “They watch each other. They glow with some kind of phosphorus. They smile. . . . They—touch hands.”

At last Juliet, stiffening, put down her sewing and stared at her sister, across the gray, rain-silent room.

“Anna!”

“The tide—makes them touch. The tide comes and puts them together. It’s a perfect kind of love, with no ego to it, only two bodies, moved by the water, which makes it clean and all right. It’s not wicked, this way.”

“It’s bad you’re saying it!” cried her sister.

“No, it’s all right,” insisted Anna, turning for an instant. “They’re not thinking, are they? They’re just so deep down and quiet and not caring.”

She took her right hand and held it over her left hand very slowly and gently, quavering and interweaving them. The rainy window, with the pale spring light penetrating, put a movement of light and running water on her fingers, made them seem submerged, fathoms deep in gray water, running one about the other as she finished her little dream:

“Him, tall and quiet, his hands open.”

She showed with a gesture how tall and how easy he was in the water. “Her, small and quiet and relaxed.” She looked at her sister, leaving her hands just that way. “They’re dead, with no place to go, and no one to tell them.

So there they are, with nothing applying to them and no worries, very secret and hidden under the earth in the cistern waters. They touch their hands and lips and when they come into a cross-street outlet of the cistern, the tide rushes them together.

Then, later . . .” she disengaged her hands . . . “maybe they travel together, hand in hand, bobbling and floating, down all the streets, doing little crazy upright dances when they’re caught in sudden swirls.” She whirled her hands about, a drenching of rain spatted the window. “And they go down to the sea, all across the town, past cross drain and cross drain, street and street.

Genesee Avenue, Crenshaw, Edmond Place, Washington, Motor City, Ocean Side and then the ocean.

They go anywhere the water wants them, all over the earth, and come back later to the cistern inlet and float back up under the town, under a dozen tobacco shops and four dozen liquor stores, and six dozen groceries and ten theaters, a rail junction, Highway 101, under the walking feet of thirty thousand people who don’t even know or think of the cistern.”

Anna’s voice drifted and dreamed and grew quiet again.

“And then—the day passes and the thunder goes away up on the street. The rain stops. The rain season’s over. The tunnels drip and stop. The tide goes down.” She seemed disappointed, sad it was over. “The river runs out to the ocean. The man and woman feel the water leave them slowly to the floor.

They settle.” She lowered her hands in little bobblings to her lap, watching them fixedly, longingly. “Their feet lose the life the water has given them from outside. Now the water lays them down, side by side, and drains away, and the tunnels are drying. And there they lie. Up above, in the world, the sun comes out. There they lie, in the darkness, sleeping, until the next time. Until the next rain.”

Her hands were now upon her lap, palms up and open. “Nice man, nice woman,” she murmured. She bowed her head over them and shut her eyes tight.

Suddenly Anna sat up and glared at her sister. "Do you know who the man is?" she shouted, bitterly.

Juliet did not reply; she had watched, stricken, for the past five minutes while this thing went on. Her mouth was twisted and pale. Anna almost screamed:

"The man is Frank, that's who he is! And I'm the woman!"

"Anna!"

"Yes, it's Frank, down there!"

"But Frank's been gone for years, and certainly not down there, Anna!"

Now, Anna was talking to nobody, and to everybody, to Juliet, to the window, the wall, the street. "Poor Frank," she cried. "I know that's where he went. He couldn't stay anywhere in the world.

His mother spoiled him for all the world! So he saw the cistern and saw how secret and fine it was. Oh, poor Frank. And poor Anna, poor me, with only a sister. Oh, Julie, why didn't I hold on to Frank when he was here? Why didn't I fight to win him from his mother?"

"Stop it, this minute, do you hear, this minute!"

Anna slumped down into the corner, by the window, one hand up on it, and wept silently. A few minutes later she heard her sister say, "Are you finished?"

"What?"

"If you're done, come help me finish this, I'll be forever at it."

Anna raised her head and glided over to her sister. "What do you want me to do?" she sighed.

"This and this," said Juliet, showing her.

"All right," said Anna, and took it and sat by the window looking at the rain, moving her hands with the needle and thread, but watching how dark the street was now, and the room, and how hard it was to see the



round metal top of the cistern now—there were just little midnight gleams and glitters out there in the black black late afternoon. Lightning crackled over the sky in a web.

Half an hour passed. Juliet drowsed in her chair across the room, removed her glasses, placed them down with her work and for a moment rested her head back and dozed. Perhaps thirty seconds later she heard the front door open violently, heard the wind come in, heard the footsteps run down the walk, turn, and hurry along the black street.

“What?” asked Juliet, sitting up, fumbling for her glasses. “Who’s there? Anna, did someone come in the door?” She stared at the empty window seat where Anna had been. “Anna!” she cried. She sprang up and ran out into the hall.

The front door stood open, rain fell through it in a fine mist.

“She’s only gone out for a moment,” said Juliet, standing there, trying to peer into the wet blackness. “She’ll be right back. Won’t you be right back, Anna dear? Anna, answer me, you will be right back, won’t you, sister?”

Outside, the cistern lid rose and slammed down.

The rain whispered on the street and fell upon the closed lid all the rest of the night.

The End