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The Beggar in the Living Room of Our Souls

“The Beggar in the Living Room” is a brilliant science fiction short story by William John Watkins, awarded the Nebular Rewards for the best short story in 1994. The narrator is a small boy who lived with his step-father after his mother had died. A tragedy, in which his step-father dies, leads him to an extended family member’s home, which causes him even more psychological damage and eventually makes him leave and live on the streets. With his marvelous short story, the author masterly questions the conventional ethics and morality.

From the very beginning of the story, the narrator presents himself as the one who is bad, wrong, and the one to blame: “I know there must be something wrong with me for what I did,” he says. His narration of the story is constantly interrupted with self-reproaches and self-humiliation: “Lester was right and I'm a selfish little bastard and ought to be living out on the street like a dog.”; “I thought Lester was right, I was just a "crazy little son of a bitch" like he always said and probably good for nothing like he said too.”; “Lester was right, I'm an ungrateful little bastard and always will be”. Nevertheless, this tells more not about the boy, but about the people who surrounded him and taught him to think so of himself. As every kid, he learned the norms of morality from what he saw around him, and from what he saw on TV.

The boys’ life was not easy. The boy’s mother did not care about him much. He says about the Aunt Zsa-Zsa: “she fussed over me more than my mother ever did”, and admits that he had been dreaming about living with somebody like his Aunt and Ankle, even when his mother was alive. Nevertheless, when his mother died, no one has come to take the boy, as he used to dream,

and he was forced to live with the step father, whom he hated. The readers first see Lester, boy's stepfather, when the narrator describes the car wreck. Though the readers find out from his words that Lester had a habit of driving being drunk and beating the boy with no reason, the narrator neither expresses his indignation nor calls for pity in relation to this, but simply puts it as a normal fact: "I was sitting in the back seat, which I always did when he was drunk, and he was reaching over the seat to take a swat at me for something, I don't remember what, maybe there wasn't even anything". Another fact the boy tells about his life with a step-father does not give him understanding of what is right, too. Having drunk step-father's beer once, he was severely beaten. Nevertheless, it is not clear if he was beaten for drinking alcohol or leaving Lester with water filled into the bottle instead of beer.

Aunt and Uncle actually never ask the boy about his life with a step-father. Instead, he tells that aunt Zsa-Zsa continues to call him a "Lester's child" even after he tries to oppose her, because "that was just a technicality and your parents are who raise you not who gave you your genes," she says. It does not actually matter to her, that Lester did not raise him in the full meaning of the word. Another ethical issue is that the boy is expected to grieve after his step-father death. He does not, because he "was tired of getting slapped around" and "going to run away in another couple months anyway", though he feels ashamed of thinking so and does not confess his feelings to the Aunt. Aunt Zsa-Zsa and probably other people who are always ready to judge what is wrong and what is OK according to the common norms of morality, said "it was OK I didn't cry over Lester, everybody grieves in their own way". This norm of morality will be questioned later, when Zsa-Zsa will console the boy crying for people murdered in the mountains: should one really grieve for the wretched person they know and not grieve for unknown innocent people being killed?

From the very beginning and even after a horrible experience Aunt and Uncle made the boy come though, he still considers them great people. Introducing them, he says: "I was lucky to be there, and "Aunt" Zsa-zsa and "Uncle" Howard were as nice to me as anybody could be". He also remarks the beauty of Aunt Zsa-zsa, who was prettier than his mother and her very name Zsa-Zsa, which is actually a nick name, resembles that of a Zsa Zsa Gabor, a beautiful American actress. This shows how important the concepts of *niceness* and beauty are for evaluation of person's personality. In his description of his new parents the boy refers to the media as the one presenting standart: "They were like TV parents, they never yelled, not even at one another, and when I did something wrong, they sat down and talked to me and explained why it was wrong and what I ought to do about it." Still, the author makes the readers realize that there are ethical issues, which are more important than apparent niceness.

It seems the family of Howard and Zsa-Zsa are themselves the victims of the media image of ideal parents. "Aunt Zsa-zsa was always stocking the refrigerator with soda, and filling up the cupboards with chips and pretzels, and asking me what kind junk food I wanted. There was always ice cream in the refrigerator, and cookies and anything else I wanted, and if there wasn't, we'd go for a drive and get some," tells the narrator. Nevertheless, it can be doubted that good parents have to give the child all he wants. They have the house, which seems ideal, but many of the sofas and chairs are just holograms, so no one should be seated on them. This very detail illustrates there exists great difference between the image of something and its true meaning. The readers can observe that modern people do not see anything wrong in having chares, which cannot be seated on, since they look nice. This is a new addition to the conventional morality, which the author masterly feels. This idea is sustained by their reaction to the boy's words: "They ought to shoot that son of a bitch! ... That fucking cop!" In particular, their reaction reflects apparent, not true

morality. They focus on the words the boy uses, not on the suggestion to actually kill a man. Even more, their reaction to the words is not indignation. They go on being nice and good. The Aunt says: "You should really try not to use that kind of language. ...I don't mind it really, but some people would think poorly of you because of it." And the Uncle says "It's all right among the boys ... and it doesn't upset us, but you don't want to get in the habit of using it. It doesn't sound good." They actually teach their child the suggestion was wrong because it did not sound good and people can think poorly of his language, mentioning no moral issues.

Having a pretty good idea about what is nice, great Aunt and Uncle from the story seem to have no idea about what is morally good and what is nonacceptable. The child beggar with swallowed belly, which was so sad looking that it made the boy want to cry, did not cause the hosts any discomfort at all. They passed through him with food and ice cream, and it was only the boy, considering himself bad and worthless, who felt uneasy: "it still seemed to me like every time somebody walked by him with some food, his eyes followed them," he says. The two times when the boy finds himself in the middle of the horrifying scenes of murder, death and despair, he experiences deep feelings, while the grown-ups do not even pay attention to the horror of the situation. The readers are immediately made to feel the piercing impropriety of their reactions: the poor kid, the beggar, makes them laugh; the next time, "Aunt Zsa-zsa came into the room and looked at the dead guy, right into his head where the brain was all churned up and looked like mashed potatoes and ketchup with hair in it, and said, "Dinner's ready in a minute, what kind of salad dressing do you want?". The next scene is even more horrifying, yet the response of the Aunt is calm and reassuring: "What are you crying for, dear?" she says, "It's not real. It's just an image your Uncle Howard took off the TV news." The fact that it was taken from the TV news means it was real. And it was horrifying, as people suffered and died in pain, and there were other people

who killed them with piercing ruthlessness, but people have used to live by someone else's pain not perceiving it as their own.

In this context the repetition of the phrase, Uncle Howard's prediction, that "In five years, every house in America will be like this" and the final conclusion of the boy, that "a lot of houses in America are just like Uncle Howard's already" is the most important idea the author communicates. Even now people have enough technology and information to be aware of starving beggars, murders, and genocides, still they do nothing about it, moreover they do not even really experience the feelings, which are morally justified in such situations, as everything on the TV seems so distant and not real. This way the author shows that many people have substituted apparent morality with true compassion and makes readers question themselves again what is right and what is wrong.

To conclude, the author wrote a magnificent story challenging people to reconsider the moral dilemmas they face and moral choices they make, as it is everyone's own choice how to respond to the silent beggar we are aware of, even though he cannot reach us. Another good reminder presented by the author is that our children are always next to us trying to make sense out of the moral lessons they get, and we are the ones responsible for what they know and understand.