



## The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas

*Ursula K. Le Guin*

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Some inhabitants of a peaceful kingdom cannot tolerate the act of cruelty that underlies its happiness. The story "**Omelas**" was first published in *New Dimensions 3*, a hard-cover science fiction anthology edited by Robert Silverberg, in October 1973, and the following year it won Le Guin the prestigious Hugo Award for best short story.

It was subsequently printed in her short story collection *The Wind's Twelve Quarters* in 1975.

## The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas Details

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Author : Ursula K. Le Guin

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## From Reader Review The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas for online ebook

### Alex ? Deranged KittyCat ? says

You can read this short story here or listen to it on YouTube.

I want to believe I would walk away from Omelas. And you know what? I'm a hypocrite. I would not feel so outraged should it all happen to an adult. But to a child? "*I will be good,*" **it** says. "*Please let me out. I will be good!*" Why a child? Child abuse always gets to me.

And why this sacrifice? Who made this rule? Symbolism be damned, I want **this child** freed because i know about him/her. I despise the people of Omelas for accepting what is done to the child.

I cannot give more than 3 stars because of how I feel. I understand that my strong feelings mean this short story is extremely good. And yet I hate it passionately.

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### Tadiana ☆Night Owl? says

*They all know it is there, all the people of Omelas. Some of them have come to see it, others are content merely to know it is there. They all know that it has to be there.*

This 1973 Hugo Award-winning fantasy short story is extremely short, and online, and this review will contain some spoilers, so if you haven't read this already, I strongly recommend that you take 5 or 10 minutes right now and do so here. I will wait.

**\*\*Random trivia while we're waiting: Le Guin said that the name Omelas came from seeing a road sign for Salem, Oregon, in a car mirror.\*\***

Ready? The story begins with an idyllic description of the lovely, joyous city of Omelas, "bright-towered by the sea." The air is clear, young people play and race horses, there's lots of food, non-habit-forming drugs if you want them, guilt-free sex if you want it. Whatever is wonderful, it must be part of Omelas. Everyone is SO HAPPY.

*We're so happy you're so happy!*

But there's something just a little bit artificial, perhaps overanxious, even a smidge desperate, about our narrator's description of Omelas. And then the narrator, supposedly in an effort to make the listener believe in this utopian place, finally tells of the one thing that is ugly and despicable about Omelas.

Consider this question:

Or if the hypothesis were offered us of a [utopian] world ... and millions kept permanently happy on the one simple condition that a certain lost soul on the far-off edge of things should lead a life of lonely torture, what except a specific and independent sort of emotion can it be

which would make us immediately feel, even though an impulse arose within us to clutch at the happiness so offered, how hideous a thing would be its enjoyment when deliberately accepted as the fruit of such a bargain?

--William James, *The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life* (credited by Le Guin as an inspiration for this story)

And then you wonder: Would I also rationalize that the happiness of a whole city is worth the terrible misery of one innocent child? Would I try to comfort myself with the thought that trying to fix it wouldn't really work anyway? Or would I walk away? And is walking away good enough?

And in what ways do we already do this in our own lives, going along with the crowd despite our qualms or hesitations, or thinking that the end justifies the means in some questionable case? When the choice is as stark as it is in this story, it might be easy to think, I would *never*--but would we? And in what more obscure ways do we?

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### Alexxy says

This story is brilliant!

It makes you think, about so many things, which unfortunately I am not in the right mind to explain now. So, review to come!

Until then,

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### The Serendipity Aegis ~ ?Misericordia? ?????? ✨\*♥? says

At different times in our lives, we are met with choices, important ones. Some idealistic or moralistic, others of practical nature. Still, the question du jour is: **Will you walk away from Omelas when it's time to make that decision?** Or are you going to have your orgies while the world goes to hell in a handbasket?

Generally, I am not a fan of Ursula Le Guin but for this story I make an exclusion. There is some ephemeral quality about it, leading us to ponder whether mass exultation at the price of a single child's misery is worth changing the world.

Q:

They were not simple folk, you see, though they were happy. (c)

Q:

I do not know the rules and laws of their society, but I suspect that they were singularly few. As they did without monarchy and slavery, so they also got on without the stock exchange, the advertisement, the secret police, and the bomb. Yet I repeat that these were not simple folk, not dulcet shepherds, noble savages, bland utopians. (c)

Q:

**I fear that Omelas so far strikes some of you as goody-goody. Smiles, bells, parades, horses, bleh. If so, please add an orgy. If an orgy would help, don't hesitate.(c)**

Q:

One thing I know there is none of in Omelas is guilt (c)

Q:

What else, what else belongs in the joyous city? The sense of victory, surely, the celebration of courage. (c)

Q:

They all know that it has to be there. Some of them understand why, and some do not, but they all understand that their happiness, the beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships, the health of their children, the wisdom of their scholars, the skill of their makers, even the abundance of their harvest and the kindly weathers of their skies, depend wholly on this child's abominable misery. (c)

Q:

It is the existence of the child, and their knowledge of its existence, that makes possible the nobility of their architecture, the poignancy of their music, the profundity of their science. (c)

Q:

But they seem to know where they are going, the ones who walk away from Omelas. (c)

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## Cecily says

*"we have a bad habit, encouraged by pedants and sophisticates, of considering happiness as something rather stupid. Only pain is intellectual, only evil interesting. This is the treason of the artist"*

I read these half-dozen pages a couple of days ago, and it haunts me still.

A strange, disturbing and very thought-provoking short story.

There's something indefinably odd and slightly, chillingly, distant about the language from the start. That creates a suitably disconcerting contrast with the happy festival in an apparently Utopian town that it's describing. It sounds too good to be true, so the mysterious narrator (one of "the ones who walk away"?) makes suggestions directly to the reader as to how to make it more believable. That gives it a more allegorical feel.

It's unusual in a short story to spend so long on scene-setting, though true to the form, it takes an unexpected turn, which in this one, is rather grim and Biblical and/or Faustian.

## What price happiness?

Who can and should sacrifice what for the greater good?

Do individual actions matter, or does going with the flow absolve individual blame?

Would you walk away from a familiar and comfortable life if you thought the price that others had to pay was too high?

But if walking away changes nothing, is it any worse than staying (and not changing things)?

Do we routinely ignore the true cost of our own comforts? Buying "fairtrade" products is maybe more of a salve to our conscience than those who toil in poor conditions, for little reward.

Who are my scapegoats and will I atone? There are echoes of and parallels with the classic "Trolley Problem" dilemma: <http://www.philosophywalk.com/solutio...>

With the new Band Aid single in the news, I'm reminded of the horrific schadenfreude of the lyrics in the original 1984 version:

**"Well tonight thank God it's them instead of you."**

This story provides lots to think about from few words.

Also compare it with:

\* **Kafka**, who I reread alongside this. The similarities were strong enough that I've included this on my Kafka shelf. See especially, his short story, **In the Penal Colony**, which I reviewed [HERE](#). A visitor may or may not intervene in a local custom.

\* The Borges short story **A Weary Man's Utopia**, which is in *The Book of Sand*, which I reviewed [HERE](#).

\* Shirely Jackson's short story **The Lottery**, which I reviewed [HERE](#).

You can read the story of Omelas here: [http://engl210-deykute.wikispaces.umb....](http://engl210-deykute.wikispaces.umb...)

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## Traveller says

To me, this short story offers one of those "open question" scenarios. Apparently it was written in response to Le Guin's reading of the following passage from *The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life* by William James:

*Or if the hypothesis were offered us of a world in which Messrs. Fourier's and Bellamy's and Morris's utopias should all be outdone, and millions kept permanently happy on the one simple condition that a certain lost soul on the far-off edge of things should lead a life of lonely torture, what except a specific and independent sort of emotion can it be which would make us immediately feel, even though an impulse arose within us to clutch at the happiness so offered, how hideous a thing would be its enjoyment when deliberately accepted as the fruit of such a bargain?*

Le Guin wrote the piece as a musing piece of speculation, building her imagined utopia as a : "Perhaps this or perhaps that, but definitely this and this."

To me her "utopia" had the flavor of a 60's or 70's hippie's idea of what an utopia might be, I can see Ms Le Guin with bare feet and flowers in her hair.. :)

She did a very good job of posing a moral dilemma; one that doesn't seem to have a pat answer, and which one rolls around in your head considering options against one another.

I agree with the opinion that walking away might *not* be the best option...-personally, I would save the child and tough cookies for the rest, but I realize a lot of people would not agree with that way out, and I actually respect each person's 'choice' regarding the tough moral decision posed in the story.

I think this is a piece that is very hard to figure out if you try to tie it to a very specific situation, and serves it's best value if you keep it as a sort of more abstract question. I think Le Guin didn't intend for it to be

specifically tied to only one situation, but rather as a general question of ethics;- one which mainly challenges the idea of utilitarianism.

Of course, the very open-endedness of the scenario allows for it to be applied to as many specific situations as people can find it fit to do.

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### **Adina says**

I wanted to read this short story in memory of the author who died last week. I did not enjoy The Left Hand of Darkness as much as I wanted so I decided to try one of her most famous stories instead. It managed to reach me better than her larger prose.

I do not want to say anything about the story, it is so short that you should read it yourself. It raises some interesting questions. What would you allow to be sacrificed for your happiness. Is greater good more important than the life of an individual?

And this:

“The trouble is that we have a bad habit, encouraged by pedants and sophisticates, of considering happiness as something rather stupid. Only pain is intellectual, only evil interesting. This is the treason of the artist; a refusal to admit the banality of evil and the terrible boredom of pain.”

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### **Stephen says**

6.0 stars. On my list of "All Time Favorite" short stories and is in the running to be number one. Not so much a story as a narrative description of a fictional town in which everyone lives in complete and total happiness at the expense of one child's abject misery and suffering. As powerful and as emotional a piece of writing as I have ever read in any genre. Find it and read it and I am sure you will agree. This one is amazing. Highest Possible Recommendation.

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### **Sidharth Vardhan says**

*"We may be the playthings of Fate. We cannot breathe without taking life. As we talk here, we are ourselves the cause of the deaths of countless little lives."*

- Ramayana (William Buck rendering)

After building a utopia like place in some detail, narrator suddenly turns it into a morality problem, by bringing in a single suffering child. In real world the luxury of a few has always come at the price of suffering of others (humans as well as animals). My last read happened to be 'A Modest Proposal' by Jonathan Swift which was a satire on the same theme. English rich probably didn't like that price of their luxurious life should be made that obvious for them. In case of Omelas only a single child has to suffer for the happiness of all.

The thing is - the child is innocent and has NOT chosen to suffer for others (unlike Christ). The suffering is

forced upon him by others in a very organised manner (government!).

The decision of whether or not to join in the gain from suffering of child is there (to be or not to be) - but it is not too OBVIOUS a decision. There is a good chance you may die even with out giving it a thought.

### **The Default Choice**

What makes it worse still is that you are already guilty by default. By the time you get to know about the system, you already have a caused a lot of suffering. Thus the obvious rage:

*"Often the young people go home in tears, or in a tearless rage, when they have seen the child and faced this terrible paradox."*

... and of course, since we are used to all those comforts; the useless reflection and self-justification:

*"They may brood over it for weeks or years. But as time goes on they begin to realize that even if the child could be released, it would not get much good of its freedom: a little vague pleasure of warmth and food, no doubt, but little more."*

And, It is likely that at the end of the day most of us shall accept the reality:

*"Their tears at the bitter injustice dry when they begin to perceive the terrible justice of reality, and to accept it."*

And thus the system goes on as people just get used to it:

*"One thing I know there is none of in Omelas is guilt."*

**No guilt**, just as lucky people in real world feel no guilt for enjoying luxuries while others are deprived of necessities - but you see; it would seem to them they have tried everything. The other alternative of killing yourself (or turning ascetic by giving up on world), doesn't gain a grain. The old people won't even bother about the child, reminding you indifference of executor in 'In a Penal Colony' which comes over time. Also, Hunger artist (although he chose to suffer) drew similar reactions, curiosity from young and almost indifference from old.

There is another - not mentioned option; that of freeing the child. Of course that comes at cost of some suffering for all. The central question is whether greater good can be worth the price if it comes at cost of suffering an innocent minority, even a minority of one (best of Utilitarianism)? Freeing the child, to me, is real world equivalent of socialism and like socialism calls for a revolution. We shall all suffer but we shall all suffer equally. That would be what I want to do.

That may not be probable - for those who don't like the system are constantly leaving Omelas and a vast majority has unfortunately hit the peace with system.

### **Bread, Guns and Roses**

*"The trouble is that we have a bad habit, encouraged by pedants and sophisticates, of considering happiness as something rather stupid. Only pain is intellectual, only evil"*

*interesting. This is the treason of the artist; a refusal to admit the banality of evil and the terrible boredom of pain.”*

The above quote probably attacks 'Brave New World'; our author believes happiness can be achieved by adopting a simple classification of goods:

*“Happiness is based on a just discrimination of what is necessary, what is neither necessary nor destructive, and what is destructive.”*

Of course, you need at least first one, i.e. necessities (bread) for all (socialism at least in bones); everybody needs to remember that it *doesn't* matter if or not you have second, i.e. luxuries (roses) - say good bye to consumer culture; and actively avoid the third (guns) and thus be pacifist to a fault.

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## **Manny says**

In this timeless moral fable, Ursula Le Guin tells the story of OMELAS ("Oh My Electronic Liberal Association of Socialists"), a group of internet activists who consider themselves the conscience of the United States. Posing as "the Resistance", they fight for apparently worthy causes like stopping refugee babies from being taken from their mothers, combating gun violence in schools, defending the Earth's fragile ecosystem from heartless multinationals, and preventing the US from becoming a Russian satellite state. But they are exposed as the hypocrites they are when it is revealed that some of them experienced a vague feeling of satisfaction on hearing that Sarah Huckabee Sanders had been refused service at a small Virginia restaurant.

*[Is this correct? - Ed]*

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## **Ivan says**

My first 5 stars of 2018. Ursula never disappoints. One of the best short stories I read in general.

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## **mark monday says**

*“The trouble is that we have a bad habit, encouraged by pendants and sophisticates, of considering happiness as something rather stupid. Only pain is intellectual, only evil interesting. This is the treason of the artist: a refusal to admit the banality of evil and the terrible boredom of pain.”*

In case you need reminding that Le Guin is one of the very best of writers, a person of compassion and anger and intellectual rigor and elegant grace, a person of vision... read this story. It is barely 8 pages! 8 pages that tell you about a perfect city, no war and much happiness, freedom and the love of life, all that is good and true. 8 pages that tell you why some prices are too high for happiness.

and you can read it for free, right here:

<http://engl210-deykute.wikispaces.umb...>

are you still a good person if you let something evil flourish - something evil that you can stop? is happiness worth ignoring cruelty, pain, evil? what price the scapegoat? is it better to be in a constant state of striving towards happiness, for yourself and for your family and for your world - to always know that that striving never ends, that everlasting happiness and perfection are impossible while there is cruelty, pain, and evil in the world?

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## Nataliya says

Is the happiness of thousands worth the suffering of a single innocent person? Of one innocent child? Think about that. And hold your loud and resounding and outraged **NO!** for a minute.

A background - this is what the brilliant Ursula K. Le Guin brings up in her very short 1973 story *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas*. It just a few pages she asks us to conceive of a utopia, a place where everyone enjoys happiness, the lovely place. But for reasons unspecified, the happiness of all others depends on the suffering of a small child confined in the dark, unloved, malnourished and dirty with its own feces. And everyone knows, and comes to accept. Except for a few who, against all the reason, think of the child and decide to walk away from Omelas into the unknown; walk away from the happiness of many built on the suffering of one.

*"The place they go towards is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness. I cannot describe it at all. It is possible that it does not exist. But they seem to know where they are going, the ones who walk away from Omelas."*

So what the question boils down to - does the benefit of many outweigh the suffering of few? You think you have your answer ready? Is it a resounding **NO!** coming from the bottom of your outraged heart? I hope it is. And, at the same time, I hope it is not. Because nothing is as simple as that. Yes, what I'm trying to say is that even if we think there's only one answer to that, we are contradicting ourselves. ***Because we have not only made choices that contradict our outraged and heartfelt and very human 'NO!' - but we have often flaunted them so very proudly.***

Think more about that - isn't the majority's benefit trumping whatever else minority may think the cornerstone of our favorite and concept of such a long time now - **that precious and treasured democracy that is so often presented as the ultimate goal of human societal structure.** Which, unlike what so many high school students are taught, is not the power of the people. *It is the power of majority, their needs and wishes, to trump the wishes and needs of minority by the power of vote.* Because we have known and accepted throughout history that we cannot make everyone happy.

In short, someone will always have to suffer. **Through enlightenment and struggle for human rights we apparently have come to the conclusion that at least it's better when minority suffers rather than**

**majority.** This is the concept that people appear to strive for, have died defending, and have used to justify a whole lot of great and not-so-great things. That's really all we have come to applaud and flaunt. That's our democracy, folks. So how is it any different from a nameless suffering child in Omelas? Is it only the suffering of innocent childhood then that makes us appalled?

**We choose the benefit of many over the benefit of the few ALL THE DAMN TIME, like it or leave it. I feel it daily as a member of the medical profession.** I will be deliberately simplistic here, okay? Think of every screening program that we do not do because of it not being cost-effective. Think of all the antibiotics we do not give people who come in with what seems to be clearly a viral infection to prevent community antibiotic resistance - will we miss a few who would benefit from antibiotics? Surely. But to benefit them, we'd need to hurt the well-being of the community, and that is not okay, we believe. Are we right? We probably are, from the benefit to the majority standpoint. But are we right from the point of view of the one person who did not feel better? Probably not.

*"Their tears at the bitter injustice dry when they begin to perceive the terrible justice of reality, and to accept it."*

So is there the answer to the question that Ursula Le Guin asks? From the way this story is presented, I'd say the visceral response she is going for is **NO!** It is not worth it. And that's what the few who choose to dissociate themselves from this happy-for-the-majority place see. **That is why they walk away. Because sometimes you cannot live with yourself otherwise.** Because our ultimate goal as humans, as above all compassionate species (I sincerely hope we are!) is to not be content with such a situation.

But the importance of Le Guin's story is to also see the other side of this, the side we mostly choose to live on (*maybe because we are not that often challenged about it in our daily lives*) even if viscerally most of us, when actually presented with the harsh reality, like the inhabitants of Omelas all are, reject it.

*"It is because of the child that they are so gentle with children. They know that if the wretched one were not there sniveling in the dark, the other one, the flute-player, could make no joyful music as the young riders line up in their beauty for the race in the sunlight of the first morning of summer."*

The question is - faced with reality, knowing how the world works (or at least seems to work) which side would we choose? Or more importantly, no matter which side we end up on for one reason or another, would we continue remembering the pain of the ones that suffer and the happiness of those who do not, and would we make our choices thinking of the both sides? I hope I will. And I hope so will the others. **And I also know that, sadly, even in the happiest of times to come, we will still all be living in Omelas.**

Won't we?.....

If you think you're not, then you have not yet seen the poor little innocent suffering victim.

*"But they seem to know where they are going, the ones who walk away from Omelas."*

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## Manuel Antão says

If you're into stuff like this, you can read the full review.

“There's a point, around the age of twenty, when you have to choose whether to be like everybody else the rest of your life, or to make a virtue of your peculiarities.”

In “The Dispossessed” by Ursula K. Le Guin.

Thank you, Ursula k. Le Guin, for encouraging me to celebrate my peculiarities. The short story about 'Omelas' is as insightful a demolition of utilitarianism I've ever read. Well, I didn't mean refutation, I meant demolish the underlying rationale. If we're all OK with someone perfectly innocent being lumped with all misery so we can be happy, then it's for the greater good, no? If we're not happy with that trade, and I doubt any society that isn't made of psychos would be, then for the utilitarianism is obviously undesirable as second order moral justification.

If you're into SF, read on.

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## **Trudi says**

This classic short story popped up in my feed this evening, and I decided to hunt it down and read it for myself. Gorgeous gut puncher is all I can say. I love a story that can sneak up on you like that and demand from you everything in you to give. It's one of those stories that insinuates itself into your soul, that lingers in the mind.

LeGuin poses the age-old question, does the end ever justify the means? Is the sacrifice of one or few ever worth it if it means protection of the many? Humans have played those odds since the beginning of time with varying results, and varying degrees of guilt. And we will continue to do so. Because life is messy and perpetually grey. Very seldom is it simple and black and white. It's what you can live with. And those that can't? We all have an internal meter that measures bullshit and our humanity. In a perfect world, should the bullshit get too thick, should our humanity become too thin, that's when it's time to walk away from Omelas.

Or is it? What's worse, staying and doing nothing? Or leaving and doing nothing? You can stand up and say something is wrong that you cannot stand it, that you cannot bear it, but if you do nothing to *change it*, what have you really accomplished? And who among us has the energy, will, courage and daring to change the things we know are wrong? All the daily wrongs that we see *every single day*. All of the unhappiness, desperation, cruelty. Child soldiers in Africa, dehumanizing labor camps in North Korea, women being stoned to death, children being worked to death. Maybe our happiness does come at a high price after all.

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