**Morris Lurie: The Larder (1984)**

*'Larder of the earth, the sea. Man’s richest feeding ground.'*

**2**

The people who didn’t go to the reef crowded around to see what the others had brought back. ‘My goodness,’ said one of the old ladies who hadn’t gone (she had come for a rest, and was a little bit frightened of boats and water and all that stepping up and down), ‘what are they?’ She peered down at one of them, blinking. It lay on its back, on the grass, the creature tucked up inside its shell, only the tip of its claw visible, quite harmless, but the old lady wouldn’t touch it. Some of the others were crawling about on the grass. The island dog sniffed at them and barked. ‘Aren’t they beautiful?’ said the people who had brought them back, pushing them with their feet when they tried to creep away too far, out of the circle of light. Forty people had gone to the reef, and they had brought back almost a hundred shells. The tide was in, so the boat had been able to tie up at the quay, and they had stepped straight ashore, laughing, flushed with sun, exhausted, the usual tourists. When the tide was out, you were brought in by flat-bottomed barge, a slow and tiring business. The tide went out almost half a mile. It was night now, quite dark. The bells for dinner sounded through the trees. ‘Is it safe to just leave them here?’ the people who had brought them back wanted to know, because they were hungry and wanted to go in for dinner. ‘Safe as houses,’ said the guide. ‘Turn them over, they won’t get far.’ So they turned them over and left them there on the grass, some of them wriggling, most of them still, with the island dog sniffing and growling and running around them in the night.

**3**

They talked about them over dinner, proudly. ‘Oh, I brought back nine,’ one of them said. He laughed. He was a real-estate agent with a huge face, loose jowls, shaggy eyebrows, his shirt open at the throat and his corduroy jacket loosely thrown over his shoulders, leaving his arms free while he ate. ‘Don’t know what the hell I’m going to do with them all, but there they were, free for the taking, you can’t pass up a chance like that. Damn rare. Chance of a lifetime. God knows when I’ll be in these parts again. Well, see that lady over there? – with the glasses? She brought back twelve. Love to see her getting all those home, ha ha. One of them about the size of this table.’ ‘Really?’ said a lady who hadn’t gone. She was a schoolteacher. ‘That big?’ ‘Naah,’ said the real-estate agent, laughing, his mouth full of food. ‘I’m joking. But pretty big, all the same. About like this.’ He showed her with his hands. She narrowed her eyes and shook her head. ‘What are they exactly? What are they called?’ she wanted to know. ‘Don’t ask me,’ said the real-estate agent. ‘Beautiful things, though. When you turn them over. Smooth as silk. You have to take the things out of them though, otherwise they really stink up the place.’

**4**

They had crawled quite far in the morning, some of them off the grass and onto the gravelpaths, and a few of them even further and in amongst the trees, but they were all found and all brought back. The larger ones hadn’t moved at all, their silk-smooth purple and mauve underside still pointed up to the sky. In some of them, the creature had come quite a way out, and you could see the pink of its body past the claw. But they all ducked back into their shells as soon as they were touched, except for the very tip of the claw, for which there was no room in the shell. They were lightening fast. They had already started to smell. A few of them looked dead.

**5**

The owners of the shells gathered around them, poking them with their feet, picking them up, turning them over, comparing shells, boasting of their own. But a few of them, seeing them now in the sun, appeared slightly embarrassed. They had brought back so many! Yesterday’s enthusiasm hung on a thread. In the bright morning sun, under the palms, you could see how ugly they were, spiky, as rough as rocks, crawling slowly on the grass. But their undersides, in the morning sun, were more beautiful than ever.

**6**

A few of them set straight to work to get the creatures out. The others watched, not knowing what to do. It was hard to get hold of the claw, and even when you did, it was impossible to pull the creature out. It hung on grimly, locked inside its shell. You could pull them out about an inch, no more. And once you let go, the creature would hastily withdraw, and that was that. It wouldn’t venture out again, unless you left it alone for over an hour.

**7**

‘Bastards, aren’t they?’ said the real-estate agent. He had sat himself down on the grass and had one in his lap and was scratching away at the creature with a long-bladed knife, trying to gouge it out. ‘That’s awfully cruel,’ said the schoolteacher, and shuddered. The real-estate agent laughed. ‘Naah,’ he said. ‘They don’t feel a thing. Larder of the earth, the sea. Man’s richest feeding ground. There’s plenty more where this came from, and getting this fella out won’t make any difference at all. Pity they’re not edible though.’ He continued gouging with his knife, squinting in the sun, enjoying his work.

**8**

It was impossible to get them out with knives and sticks. Someone tried a fishhook but that tore through the creature, which quickly withdrew, leaving a wet colourless smear on the shell. Wire was useless. Throwing them about on the grass didn’t do anything at all. Putting them in water to coax the creatures out and then using a knife was a waste of time. It was half-way through the morning and no one had succeeded in removing a single one.

**9**

But they kept at it, undaunted. They sat about on the grass, under the trees, smoking cigarettes and trying everything they could think of and calling out suggestions to each other. ‘Why not just leave them in the sun?’ someone suggested. ‘Let the ants eat them out.’ ‘They’ll smell for months,’ was the reply to that.

**10**

Then someone hit upon an idea. Everyone gathered around him and he explained it. ‘Fishing line,’ he said. ‘Make a noose around the claw and then hang the shell up and the weight of it will drag the things out.’ He showed them how. In thirty minutes they had hung them all up. They hung them from shrubs and from low branches and from railings. Everywhere you looked there were shells hanging. The method began to work at once. You could see the shells inching down to the ground, the creatures stretching, more and more of them coming out, pink in the sun. In ten minutes, some of them had pulled out as much as six inches, thin and pink, with the shell swaying under them. The owners of the shells watched, fascinated, until the bells rang for lunch, and then they went off to wash their hands and to eat.

**11**

All through lunch you could hear the shells dropping, plop, plop, softly on to the grass, regularly, one after another. You could see them lying on the ground through the windows of the dining room, like coconuts, except for the spikes. And you could also see those that hadn’t yet dropped, hanging low, the creatures stretched to a foot and more, the shells swaying and rocking under them though there was no wind.

**12**

The people who had hung them up were very happy at lunch. ‘There goes another!’ they called out, each time one fell to the ground. There was a lot of laughing and joking. They made bets to see which ones would drop first. The fishing line idea, they agreed, had been a stroke of genius.

**13**

By the time the main course arrived, they had all dropped. The grass was littered with shells. Those that had fallen with their undersides up shone in the sun. Most of them fell the other way, rough side up, the way they had looked on the reef, where you could hardly tell them from rock, except for the movement.

**14**

Then the birds came. They came just as the dessert was being served. They wheeled in the sky, scores of them, their wings flapping, screaming, crying, swooping down with their beaks open, flashes of white and grey, with red legs and orange beaks. They came for the things on the fishing lines, hanging from the trees. You could smell the things through the open windows of the dining room, as rank as the sea, salty and foul. The attack of the birds was sudden and swift. It was all over before coffee.

**15**

After lunch, the people who had brought the shells back from the reef collected their shells and stacked them up outside their rooms, ready to take home with them. It was wonderful, they said, how cleanly the creatures had come out. The shells were not harmed at all.

**16**

They left the next morning, early, while the tide was still in. They took about twenty shells with them. They took only the smallest ones, those about the size of your hand. They were a good size, they said, for your mantelpiece. The others were ludicrous. They laughed, imagining them in their homes. Anyhow, they couldn’t possibly fit them all into their luggage. The shells they didn’t want they left outside their rooms. After the tourists had gone, the unwanted shells were pushed into a pile and thrown away, like the unwanted shells of the week before, and the week before that, and the week before that.

**17**

In the afternoon, a fresh boatful of tourists came in. They had come to swim and to drink and to laze in the sun. But already they were eager for their trip to the reef. They had been promised a treat. Their trip to the reef would take place on the day of the lowest tide of the year.

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