

Mr Ka and the Heefer

Jethro Ashburton — for that was his name, though he was universally known to everyone as Bertie — would seem odd in any setting even were he not deaf. He was short and amazingly ugly. Everyone said so. Nor was he especially bright, but with a very retentive memory he got by easily, considering no one else was very much brighter.

Roger ordered a reprint copy of Cyril Connolly's *Enemies of Promise* for himself out the school library's budget.

Bertie was rather an idiot savant, but the other boys did not treat him any better for that. Because they could bully him, they did bully him. The little indignities and humiliations added up. Bertie would pop someone and then be hauled in while the bullies were overlooked yet again. It was such a common story, and would be a banal one if it were less consequential. No one had any idea what went on where they couldn't see, which of course included Bertie's parents if they'd cared, which Roger said they did not. Roger spoke up and there were some ineffectual attempts at intervention, but all that came of it was that Bertie was locked up with a counselor for some days, his skinny ugly body hunched over, hands clasped between his knees (or maybe he would sit on them?) trying frantically to find the right story that would get him out.

Somehow the cat seemed implicated in all this.

Good will aside, Roger got nowhere with Bertie. He bumbled along like the other teachers who were spoiling life in the staff room with their complaints and phony empathy.

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Bertie was in the library again. It was the middle of the night. He felt like busting something.

Last time, Bertie knocked some things onto the floor and pulled a lot of books off the shelf. That was easy, so it wasn't very satisfying. He peeked into Mr Roger's desk. It smelled of apples. Mr Roger usually had an apple for lunch, which he stored in his desk to eat while he minded the library over the lunch period. The other teachers all had cafeteria duty, but the library was supposed to be open.

Bertie was a fast reader. He had read all the books in the Penfield library and most of them in the little town library in the square by the train station when he could go there. In the town library he could only see the books in the children's room. Those were all incredibly boring and even more boring if you read them again. He was, he supposed, angry with Mr Roger for not having more interesting books and had probably pulled them all down last time looking for the other books, the ones that were hidden behind these ones. And then he was just angry.

Tonight Bertie had decided to look into Mr Roger's desk more carefully. He pulled out all the drawers and laid them on the floor, making no noise so as not to ruin things right away. In

one of the drawers was a book new to him titled *The Enemies of Promise* which he riffled through and put into his pocket for later. He looked in the back of the desk and underneath for things which had been hidden, or secret compartments. Under some sheets of blank paper was another book he hadn't seen yet. The title was *The Book of Ka*. He sat down to read, scrunching into the kneehole of the desk so as not to be noticed through the library windows if that guard and his dog came around. Later he thought that was stupid, he should just have taken the book, but at the time it didn't occur to him.

Bertie opened the book in the middle and found the beginning of one of the stories, or whatever they were.

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Roger thought his copy of *The Book Of Ka* was getting a little tattered. Desultorily, he looked for another. None to be had. In common with Bertie, he had a sentimental wish that this book be the saving of the boy. Roger's sentimental hopes were rather that the book — any book, really — would liberate something already within, some *chi* or Buddha-nature which would come pouring out of the rent like an enormous djinn out of a perfume bottle. He wanted to believe that books are healing, a wish entirely unsupported by empirical evidence.

Roger's deep seams of melancholy and pessimism had been formed over the years by the steady drip of blood through this porous contradiction.

It didn't help Bertie's growing contempt for social organization that he had to steal his reading. When Roger unlocked the library the next morning and found Bertie asleep under his desk he was gentle with the boy. He agreed to get Bertie some more books if Bertie would stop breaking into school rooms and causing everyone heartache. Bertie accepted this contract, though probably in bad faith.

Upon escaping from the library Bertie made a stealthy way back to his suite. He had learned how to do this without being found out by a choice of route which left him escapes at crucial spots — down a different corridor, into a nook or one of those rooms which were never locked, a double back — together with the deaf person's sixth sense for the nearness of other people. Stairwells he found the most troublesome.

Bertie stiffened in anticipation as he silently pushed the suite door open by a crack. Being deaf, he could not have heard any creaking or scraping which the door made, but he had satisfied himself by prior experimentation that he could do it. Since his suitemates were also deaf this was an ornament on Bertie's workmanship, but there was always the possibility that some nearby hidden proctor might notice.

This time someone under one of the beds shot out a hand and grabbed Bertie by the ankle. He avoided banging his head on the bedframe and took it on the hip instead. In an instant they had pinned him. The boy now sitting on Bertie's chest stank of piss. Bertie turned his head slightly.

And where have *you* been? the stinking one asked.

Since two other boys were standing on his hands, Bertie had to say it for his lips to be read.

In the commons. Swipe some food.

Bring us back some?

Bertie shook his head. Ate it, he said.

Bastard, they said, and some other things.

Of course he was. There was no point in Bertie's trying to anticipate what reasons would be found to make him more miserable. If he spoiled their fun by guessing right it would only point their viciousness with anger.

He was going to get out of this place. Out into the world. If he were run over crossing the street the first time so what? If he ran away they would catch him and throw him in the dungeon. Might prefer the dungeon, if the bread were any good and the water not rotten.

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Story time. Roger was reading, signing rather, to some younger children who were just learning the language. He'd found an appropriate cautionary tale in an obscure novel about alternate worlds.

When Mr. Ka turned off the time machine, Roger was saying, he found himself a month in the future. The job which Bill had promised him was waiting. So on the next Monday morning, instead of taking the bus to Sandhill Labs as usual, I mean as in the past, Mr. Ka went instead to Microtics Research where he had been taken on as a junior member of the team that was going to build the first heefer.

What's a heefer? one of the children asked.

I don't know, do I? We don't have heefers yet. Now Sandhill Labs also had a heefer project, but they hadn't been able to get over the problem of Loudwine recursion. What Mr. Ka wanted to know (that is, what Bill wanted) was this: had the Microtics people solved the Loudwine problem?

They had.

The answer was very simple, really. It was to hold down the reverberator with a kinkle function until the Loudwine unit had converged on reality. The Sandhill team had just not thought of using kinkle functions, but when Mr. Ka went through the mathematics of it that evening it was perfectly obvious that it would work. He was very excited. The heefer was within his grasp at last.

Mr Roger, sir?

Yes?

Who is Bill?

Well, I've forgotten.

You said Bill was going to get Mr. Ka a job.

Oh. Well, and he did, too, didn't he? You missed that. He's spying on the Microtics people. Remember? Now: although it had taken Mr. Ka no time at all to find out what he had come for, he didn't want to go back just yet. (You remember I told you that Mr. Ka was a time traveller.) If he did, you see, the Microtics people would realize that he was a spy and they would Take Steps, and things might not work out right. So Mr. Ka went on working at Microtics for another month to keep up appearances. And it was a good thing he did, or he might not have noticed the importance of the reverberator lubricant. He kept this to himself, of course, saying nothing to the Microtics people. Their heefer design would fail without more lubricant. But at last he was ready. That night he went over the heefer plans again. Satisfied, he locked them in the trunk of the time machine, put the machine on autopilot and sent it back two months to the Sandhill laboratory. They would find the plans there and use them to build a working heefer, which Mr. Ka guessed would take them from then until now. The Microtics people, who were being held up by inadequate lubrication, would read in the newspapers tomorrow about the big breakthrough at Sandhill Labs.

Mr Roger, sir?

That same boy again. Girls never ask questions. Roger thought this story would bore girls anyway. Something needed to be done to fix that.

Two months?

Well, Hugh, he'd gone one month ahead and then waited there another month. That makes two.

Hugh fidgeted, obviously unsatisfied but afraid to nag a grown-up. He took a breath and his hands burst into motion.

But where he came from they were living too and they had lived a month while Mr Ka was waiting and so it should be only one. Shouldn't it?

Yes, Hugh, but Mr Ka's trunk would be going back to where he started. So no time at all would pass, don't you see?

Obviously, Hugh didn't see. Standing, stunned, silent — somehow, Roger had said once to Saleem, these kids's silence is more silent than ours. It's unnerving.

Then what happened to the month those other people lived? *That's not fair.* Hugh waved his fists indignantly. Roger scratched his head and pretended to be puzzled. I think it's like a train on a siding, he said. When the other train passes they get to go too, afterward. Hugh sat down, dubious, and Roger resumed the story.



Late that evening he went out to celebrate.

anxiously to pry open the trunk of the time machine. His face was dripping with perspiration thick as snot, which made his eyes sting.

All at once a fierce pain in the back caused him to fall, and at that moment the trunk of the time machine popped open. Mr. Ka got to his knees, his head throbbing, and peered into the gloom at the heap of papers there, covered with

When the time machine had disappeared, Mr. Ka laughed quietly and rubbed his hands together. He was very pleased with himself. Late that evening he went out for a drink, to celebrate

Afterwards, he was run over by a truck.

They'll think I did it because we lost out to Sandhill, Mr. Ka said to himself as he stepped in front of a ten-wheeler. Bill will be in the clear. I hope I remember where I put the key to the trunk.

But he hadn't remembered, of course: it was in his pocket two months in the future. So, back at Sandhill Labs, Mr. Ka was struggling



The Book of Ka

his own spidery writing. Formulas, and little drawings of machine parts.

Ugh, he muttered. It feels like I've been run over by a truck.

And he had been, of course.

The children erupted in giggles. Compared to their struggles to get words out of the the natural laughter was startling and put Roger off his stride. He paused, then chugged

As the heefer research was being taken away for study, Mr. Ka looked sadly at the scratches on his time machine. It certainly wasn't new anymore.

And neither was Mr. Ka.

You cheated, another boy complained, by name David. He was upset too. Unea twisted the large knuckle of his

finger. I think, he said at last... but did not go on. The silence was becoming worri children were looking cautiously at each other.

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I'm sorry, Roger said. I didn't mean to cheat. What did I do wrong?

A rustling arose, which no doubt had its deaf counterpart in some disturbar empathy. They weren't used to this. They didn't like winning one — it was unnatural. getting some hostile looks, but he stood his ground.

Mr Ka doesn't have to die, he whined.

These kids are getting really good. How do they make it seem to be whining like tl was going to be left behind again, with his clumsy hands. Or maybe it was some clumsy, some haole insensitivity.

Roger started to reply but he didn't get far.

It's an *alternate* universe, isn't it?

David was near to tears.

What's wrong with Mr Ka going on living? He doesn't have to be dead. He's ove David seemed to mean outside the library window — and so who cares? You *wasted* not hurting anyone.

Roger winced.

Is he? Is he?

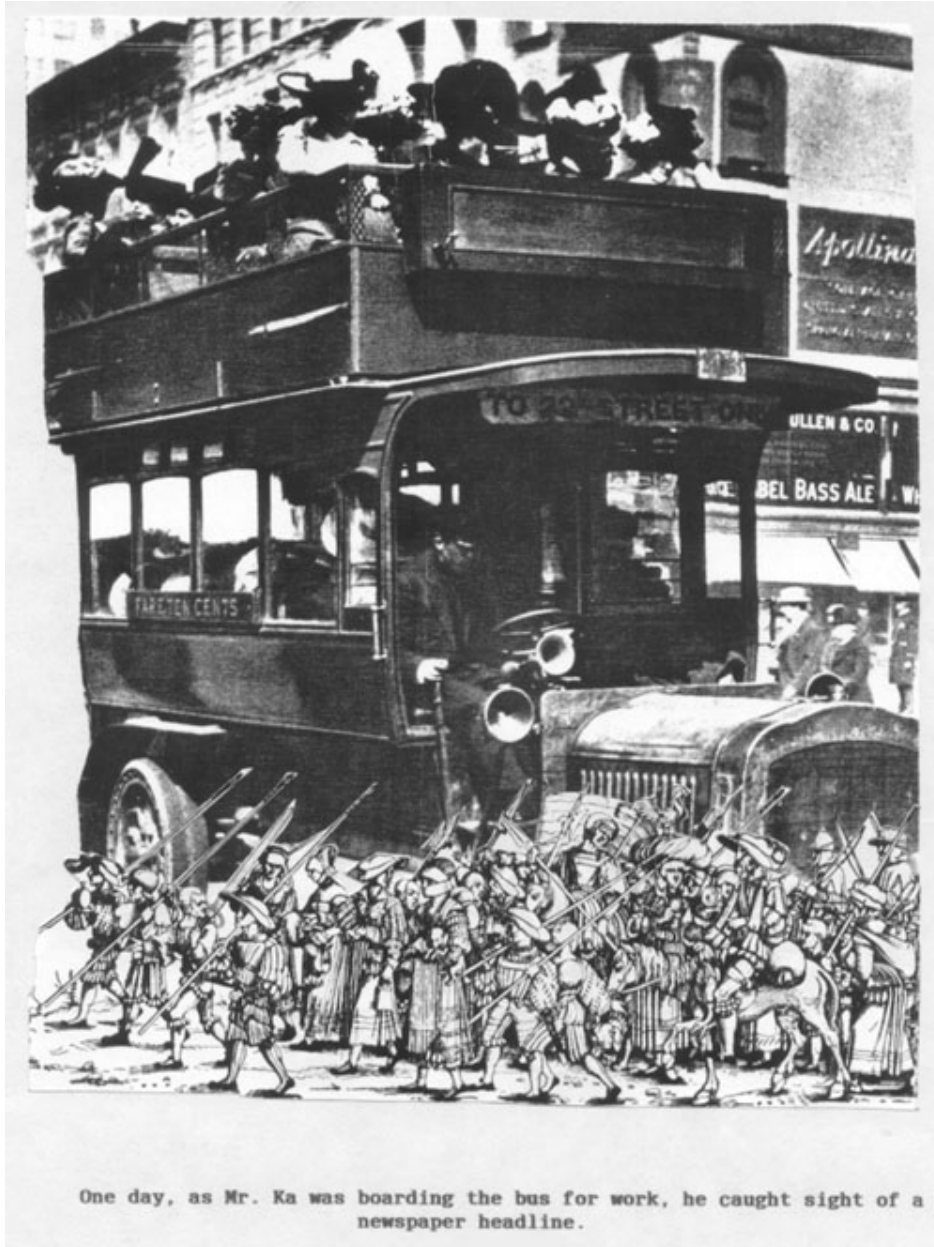
No, David. But it's too late now, I think. I'll do better next time.

David sacrificed the obvious rejoinder and sat down on his mat with a grumpy p children nodded sagely.

Roger really was sorry. But: it was also a warning to them. Well, he said at large. we do?

Nobody knew, of course.

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One day, as Mr. Ka was boarding the bus for work, he caught sight of a newspaper headline.

One day some weeks later, as Mr. Ka was boarding the bus for work, he caught sight of a newspaper headline.

HEEFER RESEARCH

AUSTIN (AP) -- A breakthrough in heefer technology was announced here yesterday by officials of Microtics Research. "There will be some scrambling to catch up now," Microtics company spokesmen predicted. Citing the work of a team led by scientist William —

Mr Ka looked frantically about for someone else with a copy of the morning paper. As he pushed toward the back of the bus he tried to work out what could have gone wrong. Had he left behind something incriminating perhaps? Was there something they hadn't told him?

Work at Sandhill Labs, he found when he arrived there, was at a complete standstill. Offices were dark, and in the laboratory everyone was at loose ends. More than a year of work was lost. Some people seemed only disappointed; others were angry or depressed. A cup of coffee had been spilled, Mr Ka noticed, on some delicate instruments. One man was working at a microscope in a corner; every so often he would kick the lab table and upset everything, so that he had to start over.

Mr. Ka picked up the telephone, but no one at Microtics was taking any calls. As the day wore on, details of the coup began to come in. But no one seemed to know just how it had been done. Mr. Ka began to wish he had not been run over by a truck, just in case.

The week went by slowly. The lab pulled itself together and got its own machine working. Even with the Microtics machine first, it was better than nothing.

Mr. Ka kept waiting to hear from Bill, who had betrayed him somehow. One morning he woke up with a fearful headache and a very stiff back. And that was all.