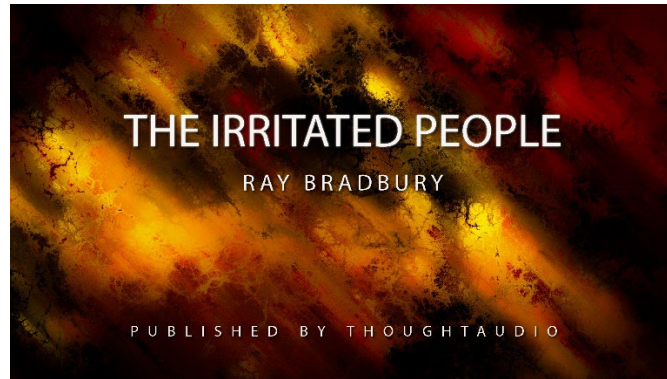


THOUGHTAUDIO



THE IRRITATED PEOPLE

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Charles Crossley, President of American Jet-Propelled Ships, lay stretched out on his favorite living room chair. The voice on the television moaned. European news swirled across the screen. Crossley twitched. Secret atomic factories. Crossley jerked. Semi-dictatorships. Crossley sweated. Political pressures. War. Crossley writhed.

His wife shut the television off indignantly. "Nonsense!" She stared at her limp husband. "Tri-Union hasn't any weapons, we haven't any, neither has Russia, Britain or anyone else. That was all settled and forbidden ages ago. When was it? 2060?"

Crossley stroked his receding hairline, sighing. "They're making atom bombs in secret," he said. He littered the rug with cigar ash.

"Stop that!" cried his wife. "My nice rug!"

"The rug, oh, the confounded rug," he said, and muttered away, closing his eyes for a long minute. Then he opened one eye. He looked at his wife. He looked at the rug, the cigar in his hand, the fallen ashes.

"The rug?" He shut his eyes again. Five minutes later he leaped up with an explosion of sound. "The rug! I've got it! I've *got* it!" He seized his wife and kissed her. "You *are* brilliant! I love you! That's it, that *is* it!"

He rushed madly off in the general direction of Europe!

Thus began the Tri-Union-American War of the year 2089.



The small jet-propelled ship crossed the Atlantic in fiery gusts. In it was Charles Crossley, a man with an idea. Behind it three thousand fellow ships tore along, putting

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space behind them. They were his ships. They belonged to his company. He employed the men. This was his own private war.

"Haha!" Mr. Crossley laughed quite obviously.

The radio cut in on him. "Crossley?"

"Speaking," Crossley answered.

"This is the President, Crossley." The voice was sharp, and it fairly heated the interior of the ship. "Turn back, in the name of common sense. What *are* you up to? I'll seize your company!"

"This can't wait, Mr. President. We've been sweating it out for months. The Tri-Union won't admit it's setting up a fascist skeleton in Europe, we can't find any proof they are, but there are rumors. We must get it out in the open. We can't wait. I'm sorry I have to act alone. Bombardiers are you ready?"

"Ready!" shouted three thousand voices in unison.

"Crossley!" shouted the President, his voice dimming in the midst of three thousand voices reverberating in accord.

"Here comes Vienna!" Crossley jerked his hand down. "Bombloads, release!"

"Release!" again, three thousand voices called out in synchronization.

"Crossley!" cried the President.

"Bang! Got 'em," said Crossley.

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Pink confetti tumbled down through the clear cool summer air. Tons and tons of pink, whirling confetti! Confetti by the bombload, three thousand cargoes of very pink, very fine confetti!

Pink confetti tumbled down through the air.

"And to think," mused Crossley happily, as he turned his ship homeward, "to think the entire idea came from spilling ashes on the rug! Victory!"

The President of the United States shook his fist.

"You bombed them!" the President shouted.

Crossley yawned. "There is no law against dropping wastepaper," he said, quietly.

"You attacked the people of the Tri-Union states!" said an exasperated President.

"No one was injured," said Crossley, calmly. "No explosions, no bruises, no fatalities. Did anybody even get a piece of confetti in his eye? The answer is no. A two-letter word for victory."

Crossley lit a cigarette.

"Fifty thousand women and one hundred thousand children swept the sidewalks below. Men flooded employment offices in Vienna for street sweeper jobs. But, ah, that clever, devilish confetti! It was electrically and chemically impregnated. It vanished when touched by human hands. It reappeared when humans withdrew from the immediate vicinity. Brooms helped little to alleviate the confetti problem. When disturbed the confetti had a curious habit of scampering away. Sensitive little things. I dare say it will be some weeks before Vienna is clean. That is what I have done to bring sense to the Tri-Union. The World Organization forbids an attack. Was this an attack, sir? Confetti in the wind? Was it?"

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"The World Organization forbids war!" cried the President.

"This is not war." Crossley leaned forward and tapped the desk earnestly.

"Suppose we dropped confetti every day, causing the Tri-Union population to pluck and curry their lawns 365 days a year? And there are *other* things we can do, Mr. President. Little, irritating things. Imagine it, Mr. President, will you wrap your mind around the ingenuity of my idea?"

The President envisioned it for quite a while. Then, slowly, he began to smile.



It was a sweet day, a morning in the Tri-Union state of Bruegher. The sky was blue, the clouds were billowy white. And upon the rolling green hills, a picnic was spread, with thousands of tossed paper napkins, hundreds of baguette rolls, thousands of bottles of beer and wine, cheese plates, varietal meats, boiled eggs, and a field of friends and families enjoying the beautiful day. The picnic, like a river of several thousand parts, engulfed the park-like hills. One small boy running through the lush green grass paused to call out for his childhood friends to wait for him.

Laughter. The beer and wine gushed and gurgled! Songs!

The President of the United States and Mr. Crossley clinked glasses. They had brought over all the food and drink and announced to the people of Bruegher to come and enjoy a picnic where all the food and drinks were free. Those in faraway places would have planes to pick them up so they could enjoy the festivities. Everyone in Bruegher and the surrounding communities came. The President and Mr. Crossley sat together overlooking the crowds, enjoying the success of the picnic. They drank gustily, refilled their glasses, and drank again. The crowds yelled, screamed in delight, played tag, and threw away empty bottles of beer and wine throughout the park!

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On hundreds of other Tri-Union hills, twenty thousand other small family ships landed. Twenty thousand more picnic riots began. Sixty thousand napkins, well wadded, were dropped from wiped lips! One hundred thousand half-eaten sandwiches were spilled! Sixty thousand picnic baskets were left gleaming in the sun. Three hundred million ants rushed out to welcome them. And the thirty million people of Greater Bruegher glared at the invasion, not knowing what to do. What was the world coming to?

At nightfall, the last little boy had emptied himself of his brackish contents, the last little girl plucked bawling from a poison ivy nest, the last piece of sausage dispatched, and the last beer bottle left a foamy vacuum.

Flying away into the night, the American invaders sent back their war cry which sounded remarkably like and probably was — a belch.

General Krauss, the personal representative of Bruegher, the new semi-dictator of Europe, shouted out of the televisor.

"Mr. President, you, *you* were seen, by reliable witnesses, to peel an egg and, bit by bit, throw the shell under a one-hundred-year-old linden tree!"

Crossley and the President stood together in the White House's inner sanctum. The President spoke.

"Krauss, the peace laws specify no nation may manufacture weapons for killing, wounding, or destruction of another's national populace or property. We are helpless to attack you, therefore. All the while, you, in secret, make weapons —"

"You can't prove that!" shouted General Krauss.

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"— you are secretly making weapons," said the President, grimly. "So, for our last recourse, we use weapons that are no weapons at all. We have destroyed nothing and no one."

"Ah-hah!" Krauss snapped the keys on the televisor. His face vanished. A new scene replaced it, showing a green meadow. Krauss' voice crackled behind it. Then in comment, he said, "Property damage to Greater Bruegher! Listen! Here's the rough estimate! Sixty-five thousand ants, large and small, both black and red, biting and non-biting, were trodden on at your picnic!"

The scene dissolved into yet another.

"Look at the havoc you caused! Ten million grass blades. Approximately. Ten million trampled and crushed. Two thousand pretty flowers. Picked!"

"That was an error," apologized Crossley. "The children got out of hand."

"Two thousand flowers," repeated Krauss savagely. "*Picked!*"

Krauss took time to get hold of himself. He cleared his throat and continued.

"Approximately thirty billion atomic particles of wood brushed off Great Bruegher sycamores, oaks, elms, and lindens by adults playing tree tag — AND — sixty million particles scraped from Greater Bruegher fences by young men escaping angered Greater Bruegher bulls. AND!" he thundered. The scene dissolved once more, and a most interesting view was revealed. "And — sixteen thousand cubic feet of A-1, first-class forest moss crushed, rolled upon, and otherwise malpracticed upon by young lovers idling in the thickets! You unofficially called a holiday in our land, and that is a violation. There you are! The proof! The proof! This is war!"

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The first Tri-Union airships flew over New York a week later. From the airships, a plethora of small yellow boxes floated down from the sky.

Crossley, in his garden resting, preparing new methods of attack on the enemy, was astonished as one of the devices hovered by the nearby red brick garden wall.

"A bomb!" he cried and leaped into the house and as he waited for the bomb to explode, he was sorry he had started this infernal war in the first place.

Edith, his wife, peered from the rear window.

"Oh, come back outside," she said. "It's only a radio."

As Crossley gazed toward the yellow radio, he and his wife listened. It was music. Digital EDM music.

"Oh, I studied that sound in my music history class in college. That music originated back in the 1980s when young people went to clubs and began the madness we still see today in young people," said Edith.

"Hmm, that's very strange," said Crossley.

The song playing on the radio was nonsensical with heavy, booming bass beats, irreconcilable melodic tones, and no sense of phrasing — just a never-ending thumping of digitally produced tones driven by a resounding four-four presto bass rhythm in staccato articulation.

"Interesting," said Crossley.

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"Yes," his wife said.

The song ended. They looked at each other in amazement and wondered why this was happening.

Then the song began again.

"Is that all it plays?" said Edith. "I don't see any dials to change the station or turn it off."

"*Oh, oh,*" said Crossley and shut his eyes. "I think I'm beginning to see the light."

The song ended and started a third time.

"That's what I expected," said Crossley. "Here, give me a hand."

The song flowed into its fourth, fifth, and sixth renditions as they poked at the dangling machine. It dodged — like a hummingbird.

"They are radar-sensitive," gasped Crossley, giving up a sighing "Oh, no!"

Edith covered her ears with her hands. "Oh, Charles, what are we going to do?" she asked.

They went into the house, shut the door tight, and shut the windows tighter. Nevertheless, the music penetrated.

After dinner, Crossley looked at Edith and said, "How many repetitions of that dreadful song did *you* tally?"

She counted on her fingers. "This next time will be the one hundred and thirteenth repeat," she said.

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"That's what I counted," he said, handing her wads of cotton.



He worked feverishly that evening. He made plans for war using confetti, toothpaste tubes that clogged and refused to function, a chemical that dulled razors with the first scrape — anything that would do the job of irritating his antagonist.

His young son, age twelve, was doing his homework in the next room.

"He is oblivious to that awful music," said Crossley in admiration. "Kids are marvels, they can concentrate anywhere." He crept up on his son and looked over his shoulder.

The boy was writing a composition:

"Poe authored The Cask of Amontillado, Masque of the Red Death, and wrote it in synchronized rhythm to highly pulsed Digital EDM bass notes."

"Poe? Digital EDM?" queried Crossley, quite puzzled at his son's association of two disparate genres. He turned. "Edith! Pack the suitcases! We're leaving home!"

They piled into the family helicopter. As the helicopter lifted into the sky, Crossley's small son said, looking down at the music box in the garden, "That's the two hundredth time!"

Crossley looked at Edith and knew that the situation was rapidly spiraling out of control.

It was useless to flee. The hovering radios were everywhere, bawling EDM music in all directions. They were in the air and on the ground and under bridges.

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They could not be shot down; they dodged. And the music played on.

Edith glared at her husband. She knew his stubborn insistence on imaginary weapons caused all this. His son boldly eyed Crossley's shins for kicking.

Crossley called the President.

"YOU! CROSSLEY!" screamed the President. "You are responsible for this!"

"Mr. President, I can *explain!*"



So, the war progressed. The World Organization hunched forward tensely awaiting the moment when either side went out of bounds, fired a shot, or committed a heinous slaying. But nothing of the sort happened.

Normal international trade continued. Imports and exports flowed. Food, clothing, and raw materials were exchanged in a regular fashion.

If either country had broken trade relations or made guns, knives, or grenades, the World Organization would have leaped to intervene. But not a gun was fashioned, not a knife sharpened. There were no assassinations, not one person wounded or bruised. The World Organization was helpless. In the strictest sense of the agreed-upon terms and conditions, there was no war.

Well, almost none.



"Heinrich!"

"Yes, my wife?" mewed Heinrich

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"Come look at this mirror!" his wife shouted.

Heinrich, chief deputy of the police department in a Greater Bruegher village, came slopping into the room in his easy slippers, holding his clay pipe like a small tame bird in his hand.

Heinrich looked into a mirror that reflected an image that was ridiculous, it was a misshapen image like that seen at a carnival.

"What has happened to it overnight?" he wondered. "Look at me. Ha, I look like an idiot!" He chuckled. "The mirror stretches my face like rubber, into distorted waves. Well, the mirror is warped."

"*You* are warped!" shouted his wife. "Do something about it!"

"No problem my sweet. I will buy a new one. In the meantime, use the one upstairs," he said.

"Is also warped!" she snapped. "How will I get my hat on straight, or see if my lipstick is properly drawn with a fine line, or my powder neat? You blundering loggerhead, hurry and fetch me a new mirror! Go, get one now, and hurry!"



Crossley had his orders. Find a way out. Or arrange a truce. If these next attacks by the United States did not produce results, then the United States must bargain for peace. Peace, yes. Peace from that abominable Digital EDM music playing twenty times an hour, night and day. The American Public would hold the line for as long as possible, said the President, but time was short, and puncturing everybody's eardrums seemed a most unlikely way out. Crossley was ordered to get in there and pitch.

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Crossley pitched. His jet plane streaked over Europe in an attempt to gain a peace accord. His ship lingered on, cruising the length of Europe, awaiting his arrival at his target destination.

Then, without notice, a large, unseeable beam took hold of his ship and drew it steadily down into the dark mountains of Greater Bruegher.

"Well," said Crossley, "what adventure awaits me now."



The entire capture was quiet and cordial. When he stepped from his grounded craft he was politely escorted into a city of ultra-modern buildings and avenues between the mountains. There, in a small edifice, in a small room, he met his enemy.

Krauss sat behind a desk as Crossley entered. Crossley nodded and bowed.

"Hello, Krauss. You know you will be prosecuted for kidnapping me," Crossley scowled.

"You're free to go at any time," snapped Krauss. "This is merely an interview. Please sit down."

The chair was shaped like a low pyramid. One could sit but would slide in all directions. The ceiling, where Crossley was expected to sit, was very low. He had to choose between backache or slithering around on a pyramidal chair. He chose to slither.

Krauss reached over with a prong and pinched Crossley.

"Ouch!" said Crossley.

Krauss did it again.

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"Stop that!" said Crossley.

"All right," said Krauss.

Under Crossley, the chair exploded.

Furious, Crossley leaped up. He banged his head on the ceiling. He held his back end with one hand, his head with the other.

"Mr. Crossley, I am glad you are here. Shall we talk of peace?" asked Krauss.

"Yes," said Crossley, as he bent over from pain. "We will talk of peace the moment when you stop making secret weapons. Otherwise, there will be more confetti, more picnics, and more surprises."

"So, you want more music in America, Mr. Crossley?" asked Krauss.

Another pinch.

"Ow!" screeched Crossley. "I hope you know that we can stand the music long enough to use our next weapon. We always did have it over you stuffed shirts over here. You were the inventors of psychological warfare, but as you see, we made a few improvements."

"Can one improve over music, Mr. Crossley?" asked Krauss.

"We'll find a way," said Crossley.

Kraus pinched him again.

"Ouch. Keep that away from me!" scowled Crossley.

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"I'll detail our plans, Crossley. First, an oversupply of mosquitoes in America. *Hungry ones*. Then, a chemical that causes all men's shoes to squeak with each step. Third, electrical pulses that make alarm clocks ring an hour early each morning. "

Crossley was professionally interested.

"Not bad. All within the Peace Rules. All harmless. Except for those mosquitoes," said Crossly.

"Merely skin irritants," responded Krauss.

"Still, the World Organization would definitely rule against it," said Crossley.

"You're right. Out with the mosquitoes, then!" said Krauss, as he gave Crossley another pinch.

"Ouch!" shouted Crossley.

"Did I *hurt* you?" asked Krauss. "I'm sorry. Well, let us see if we can hurt you a bit more. Do you see this paper on my desk? It is a radio report of your death five minutes ago. Your plane crashed, says the report. I have only to broadcast it, and then make sure you 'live' up to the facts contained therein. Do you see what I am saying?"

Crossley grinned. "I'm to report to the President every hour. If I do not report, the President will launch an immediate World Organization investigation. Now do *you* see?"

"That's easy to overcome. We merely say your plane crashed," answered Krauss.

"That's not even rational Krauss," said Crossley. "The Brindly-Connors motors never fail. And the new reactive propellants on my ships prevent bad landings. So, you better do better than that."

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Krauss fidgeted. "We'll think of *some* way."

"It's time for me to phone the President; may I?" asked Crossley.

Krauss shouted an order and a subordinate handed him a phone.

"There's your phone," said Krauss.

Crossley took the phone. Electricity shot up his arm, into his chest. The phone had shocked him.

"Jeepers!" cried Crossley as he immediately dropped the phone. "I'll report you for this violation of terms!"

"You have no proof," said Krauss as he laughed. "You see, we can both play this irritation game, can we not? Now, go ahead. You can use the phone without incident."

This time, Crossley got the President:

"Crossley, have you heard the news?" asked the President.

"What news, sir?" asked Crossley.

"Chewing gum. It's all over the news. Chewing gum is all over the place! It's all over the streets and sidewalks," thundered the President,

"In the streets and sidewalks, sir?" asked Crossley somewhat confused.

The President groaned. "In the streets, the sidewalks, the roofs, the dog's fur, the cars, the shrubs, everywhere! They are big as golf balls — and sticky beyond belief!"

Krauss gloated, listening attentively.

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"Courage, Mr. President. Use the croquet hoops," said Crossley.

"Croquet hoops?" Krauss seized Crossley's arm.

"Invisible croquet hoops." Crossley smiled. "We'll plant them everywhere that people walk. Can you imagine people walking into invisible croquet hoops?"

"No," Krauss cried. "People will stumble, be hurt, even killed by them. The Word Organization will stop you!"

"Oh," said Crossley. His face fell. "Look, Mr. President. About those hoops. Forget them. Proceed with Plan 40 and 45 instead."

"The plans have been enacted," said the President.

In a short while, another phone rang, and the subordinate answered it.

"Your wife, Herr Krauss," said the subordinate.

"All right, put her on," bellowed Krauss.

"I'm okay, Mr. President. It seems I had enemy-imposed engine trouble," said Crossley.

"What!" shouted Krauss.

"Darling, the most terrible trouble!" mewed Mrs. Krauss.

"Katrina, I have no time. I'm in the middle of a crisis, and it demands all of my immediate attention," shouted Krauss.

"This is important! It's horrible!" cried Mrs. Krauss.

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"Well, what is it, my darling?" asked Krauss.

"Answer me, Crossley, were you shot down?" asked the President.

"Not exactly, Mr. President. They're just trying to figure out a way to kill me. They haven't hit on one yet."

"Mr. Crossley, please, not so loud, I can't hear my wife talking. Yes, darling?" said Krauss.

"Hans, Hans, I have dandruff!" cried Mrs. Krauss despondently.

"I'm sorry, I didn't hear you. Say that again. There is too much noise here, Katrina."

"I'll call you again in an hour, Mr. President," said Crossley.

"Dandruff, Hans, dandruff. A thousand, five thousand flakes on my shoulders!" said Mrs. Krauss.

"You call to tell me this? I'll see you when I get home. Goodbye!" said Krauss.

Both phones landed with a BANG. Crossley and Krauss hung up in unison, Krauss on his wife, Crossley on the President.

"Where were we?" said Krauss, sweating.

"You were going to kill me. Remember?" Crossley smiled.

Again, the phone rang. Krauss swore out loud and answered it. "What?"

"Hans, I've gained ten pounds!" said Mrs. Krauss.

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"Why do you insist on calling me to tell me these things?" asked Krauss.

"Dear, you don't understand. Mrs. Leiber, Mrs. Krenschnitz, and Mrs. Schmidt, they too have gained ten pounds!" cried Mrs. Krauss.

"Oh, I see." Krauss hung up, blinking. "So, now I understand." He glared at Crossley. "I see you launched your Plans 40 and 45. All right, Crossley, we also can be subtle."

Krauss turned around and shouted, "Bring in the Doctor!"

A door slowly slid open in the wall. There stood an evil-looking rogue, sleeves rolled high, squirting a hypodermic needle into the air with an unscrupulous smile.

He looked at Crossley with a villainous glare and said, "I'm prepping it just for you. "

"Get him!" cried Krauss.

Everyone in the room jumped on Crossley.

All Crossley could see was darkness.

"How do you feel, Crossley?" asked Krauss.

"How am I supposed to feel?" responded Crossley, slightly disoriented. He found himself on an operating table. He bent upward and looked at the doctor and then at Krauss.

"Now Doctor," said Krauss. "Explain to Mr. Crossley what he may expect ten years from now."

"Ten years?" said Crossley in alarm.

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The doctor placed his thin fingers together tapping them in unison and bowing, and then he whispered softly to Crossley.

"Ten years from now you may expect — ah — let's say, a little trouble. It will commence one year from now. Unobtrusively at first. Here or there a slight gastric upset, a cardiac disturbance, and a minor intra-irritation of the lung sacs, occasionally, a headache. A sallowness to the complexion, an earache, perhaps."

Crossley began to sweat. He held onto the side of the operating table.

The doctor continued, slowly, pleased with himself.

"Then, as the years pass, a small flicker of the heart, like bird wings. A pain, as if stabbed in the groin. A twitching of the peritoneum¹. Hot sweating, late at night, drenching your bedclothes. Then continuous bouts of insomnia, night after night, cigarette after cigarette, headache after headache."

"That will do," said Crossley bleakly.

"No, no." The doctor waved his hypodermic. "I'm not finished yet. Temporary blindness. I almost forgot about that. Yes, temporary blindness. Fuzzy lights in your head. Voices. Paralysis of the lower limbs. Then, your heart, in one last extended explosion, lasting ten days, will beat itself into a bruised pulp. And then you are scheduled to die "— he consulted a mental calendar— "exactly ten years, five months, and fourteen days from today."

¹ PERITONEUM: The peritoneum is a thin, transparent membrane that lines the abdominal cavity and covers the organs within it. It is one of the serous membranes of the body, which are specialized membranes that secrete a serous fluid to lubricate and reduce friction between organs and body cavities.

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The silence in the room was disturbed only by Crossley's intense, heavy, and uneven breathing. He tried to lift himself from the operating table, but only shivered, and then collapsed flat on his back.

Then Crossley was strapped to the operating table. He could not move a muscle. The doctor tapped Crossley's arm and injected the venom into his veins.

"Excellent. Now that the doctor has completed his procedure, there's something you need to know. Best of all, there will be no evidence of what we have done to you today," said Krauss. "Certain hormones and molecular impurities were put into your body. No analysis now or after death would reveal them. Your health will simply fail. We will not be held responsible. Clever, is it not?"

The doctor said, "You may go at any time you wish. You may rest awhile if you feel woozy. But now that we have inoculated you, like a time bomb, to die later, there is no need to constrain you. Again, you are free to go. We would not want to kill you here, that would make *us* responsible. But, ten years from now, in another place, how can we be held responsible for that?"

The phone rang.

"Your wife, Herr Krauss."

"My hair is falling out!" screamed Mrs. Krauss.

"Now, now, be patient, my wife," said Krauss.

"My skin is yellowing! Do something!" shouted Mrs. Krauss.

"I will be home in an hour."

"There will be no home for YOU here!" cried Mrs. Krauss.

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"We must go on to Victory, my sweet," said Krauss.

"Not on a path strewn with my beautiful, golden hair" screeched Mrs. Krauss.

"Yes, my lovely wife, I will say hello to the doctor for you."

"Hans, don't you dare hang up on me. Don't you" — Click!

Krauss sat down, fluttering his hands weakly. "My wife called me to say all is well."

"Ha, I doubt that," said Crossley, weakly.

Krauss reached over and pinched him.

"Ouch," reverberated Crossley.

"There," said Krauss. "Speak when you're spoken to."

Crossley stood up, laughing. The doctor looked at him as if he were insane.

"I've got it. I'm going to end it all now!" proclaimed Crossley.

"You're crazy," said Krauss.

"Ten years from now I die, so why not put an end to it here and now, thus bringing an investigation by the World Organization? What do you think of that Herr Krauss?" asked Crossley.

"You can't do that!" said Krauss, dumbfounded. "I won't permit it!"

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"I'll jump off a building, perhaps. You can't hold me here for more than another hour or the World Organization will begin an investigation initiated by my President. Then the minute you let me go, I'll jump off a building."

"No!" said Krauss.

"Or crash my ship, purposely, on the way home. Why not? What do I have to live for anyway? And if it causes your trial, so much the better. Yes, I've decided. I will end my life."

"We'll hold him here," said the doctor to Krauss.

"We can't," said Krauss.

"Release him," said the doctor.

"Don't be silly," said Krauss.

"Kill him!" yelled the doctors.

"Sillier still," gasped Krauss. "Oh, this predicament is terrible."

"Which way is it to the tallest building in town?" asked Crossley.

"You go down to the next corner, turn left, and then —." The doctor caught himself midsentence. "No. Stop. We must stop him."

"Get out of the way," said Crossley. "Here I go to die."

"But this is preposterous," screamed Krauss. "Doctor, we must think of something!"



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Women sobbed in the streets, their hair strewn in their trembling hands, detaching by the handfuls every time they touched their heads. Puddles formed wherever women met to weep. They cried, "Look, my beautiful hair, it has fallen out! *Your* hair, what about mine? Mine is more beautiful and more precious to lose! Yours was hempen rope, a horse's tail! But mine, oh, mine! It was beautiful like wheat in the high wind, and now it is falling mercilessly onto the ground!"

Crossley led the doctor and Krauss along a wide street.

"What is going on?" Crossley asked naively.

"Brute, you know well enough," whispered the doctor fiercely. "My wife, my beautiful Thicket, her blonde hair will be a ruin!"

"Speak roughly to me again," threatened Crossley, "and I'll hurl myself before the next bus."

"No! Don't, please, I implore you!" cried Krauss, seizing his arm. He turned to the doctor. "Fool. Is your wife more important than us hanging?"

"My wife is as good as your wife," snarled the doctor. "Katrina and her henna rinse!"

Crossley led the way into a building and up an elevator. They walked on a terrace on the thirteenth floor.

"The women are rioting in the streets," moaned the doctor, surveying the ruckus below.

Hundreds of women were attempting to storm beauty salons along the avenues demanding help.

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"I wonder if my Thicket is with them, raging?" asked the doctor out loud.

In huge clusters, the women of the city held their heads in their hands as if they might topple and fall on the ground. They argued, screamed, phoned their husbands who sat in high government circles and sent telegrams to the government leaders. A small group of rioting hairless women pummeled and kicked a man who laughed at their misery.

"Pardon me, Krauss," said Crossley. "There." He flicked a constellation of dandruff from Krauss' lapel.

"My hair," said Krauss, in realization. "My lovely hair!"

"Now will you sign peace terms, Krauss, before things get much worse, or shall I jump from this building and let you and your wrathful wife become bald?"

"My wife," sobbed Krauss. "Bald! Oh, heaven's no!"

"Turn over all your secret plans, admit your guilt in full, and the attack will stop. You will keep your hair," said Crossley. "And cure me of my fatal illness."

"That," said Krauss, "we cannot do. The illness, I mean. But the peace terms, ah, my sweet, balding wife, the peace terms, I reluctantly accept. Peace, it is."

"Fine," said Crossley, "but one more term." He grabbed the doctor and held him out over the edge as if to drop him.

"Stop! Don't drop him," shouted Krauss, as the doctor frantically squirmed. "I lied! We did nothing to you. It was all a psychological ruse. You merely would have *worried* yourself to death in ten years!"

Crossley was so surprised he inadvertently let go of the doctor.

THE IRRITATED PEOPLE

He and Krauss stared at the doctor fading from sight, falling to the street below.

"I didn't really mean to drop him," said Crossley.

"*Squish*," murmured Krauss, a moment later, looking down.



Crossley pushed his jet ship homeward. He radioed his wife with the news of the peace accord.

"Edith, it's over! The music will be off in an hour!"

"Darling!" she radioed back. "How did you do it?"

"Simple. They thought it was enough to irritate people. That was their error. They didn't strike psychologically deep enough. Their type of irritant only touched surfaces, made people mad —"

"And your irritations struck them to the core of their vanity," interjected Edith.

"Yes, you are right. We attacked the heart of their ego, their precious beauty, which is something no one can tolerate. People can stand radios, confetti, gum, and mosquitoes, but they won't accept looking at their distorted image in a circus mirror, baldness, or dandruff ruining their clothes, turning yellow, or losing their flowing flaxen hair. It was unthinkable to them!"

When Crossley landed, Edith was there to meet him. She ran to her husband and gave him a big hug. When they got home the radio still hung in the garden, drifting in the air and blaring digital EDM music.

"What do you make of the music, now?" he murmured.

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She kissed him.

Pulling back, she counted swiftly inside her head, glanced at the floating radio, and said, "That makes two thousand three hundred and *ten!* Honestly, I will miss Digital EDM music."

THE END