Cat's Cradle by Kurt Vonnegut. © Vonnegut. For Kenneth Littauer, a man of gallantry and taste. Nothing in this book is true. "Live by the foma(1) that make you brave and kind and healthy and happy." The Books of Bokonon. I: 5 1 THE DAY THE WORLD ENDED Call me Jonah. My parents did, or nearly did. They called me John. Jonah—John—if I had been a Sam, I would have been a Jonah still—not because I have been unlucky for others, but because somebody or something has compelled me to be certain places at certain times, without fail. Conveyances and motives, both conventional and bizarre, have been provided. And, according to plan, at each appointed second, at each appointed place this Jonah was there. Listen: When I was a younger man—two wives ago, 250,000 cigarettes ago, 3,000 quarts of booze ago... When I was a much younger man, I began to collect material for a book to be called The Day the World Ended. The book was to be factual. The book was to be an account of what important Americans had done on the day when the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, Japan. It was to be a Christian book. I was a Christian then. I am a Bokononist now. I would have been a Bokononist then, if there had been anyone to teach me the bittersweet lies of Bokonon. But Bokononism was unknown beyond the gravel beaches and coral knives that ring this little island in the Caribbean Sea, the Republic of San Lorenzo. We Bokononists believe that humanity is organized into teams, teams that do God's Will without ever discovering what they are doing. Such a team is called a karass by Bokonon, and the instrument, the kan-kan, that brought me into my own particular karass was the book I never finished, the book to be called The Day the World Ended. 2 NICE, NICE, VERY NICE "If you find your life tangled up with somebody else's, you have karass troubles." Bokonon invites us to ponder the karass of Caligula, Brutus, and Julius Caesar. The three men had little in common except that they were the three most important first-class boundaries. It is as free-form as an amoeba. In his "Fifty-Second Calypso," Bokonon invites us to ponder the karass of a Chinese dentist, and a British queen— All fit together in the same machine. Nice, nice, very nice; Nice, nice, very nice; Nice, nice, very nice— So many different people In the same device. 3 FOLLY Nowhere does Bokonon warn against a person's trying to discover the limits of his karass and the nature of the work God Almighty has had it do. Bokonon simply observes that such investigations are bound to be incomplete. In the autobiographical section of The Books of Bokonon he writes a parable on the folly of pretending to discover, to understand: I once knew an Episcopalian lady in Newport, Rhode Island, who asked me to design and build a doghouse for her Great Dane. The lady claimed to understand God and His Ways of Working perfectly. She could not understand why anyone should be puzzled about what had been or about what was going to be. And yet, when I showed her a blueprint of the doghouse I proposed to build, she said to me, "I'm sorry, but I never could read one of those things." "Give it to your husband or your minister to pass on to God," I said, "and, when God finds a minute, I'm sure he'll explain this doghouse of mine in a way that even you can understand." She fired me. I shall never forget her. She believed that God liked people in sailboats much better than He liked people in motorboats. She could not bear to look at a worm. When she saw a worm, she screamed. She was a fool, and so am I, and so is anyone who thinks he sees what God is Doing, [writes Bokonon]. 4 A TENTATIVE TANGLING OF TENDRILS Be that as it may, I intend in this book to include as many members of my karass as possible, and I mean to examine all strong hints as to what on Earth we, collectively, have been up to. I do not intend that this book be a tract on behalf of Bokononism. I should like to offer a Bokononist warning about it, however. The first sentence in The Books of Bokonon is this: "All of the true things I am about to tell you are shameless lies." My Bokononist warning is this: Anyone unable to understand how a useful religion can be founded on lies will not understand this book either. So be it. *** About my karass, then. It surely includes the three children of Dr. Felix Hoenikker, one of the so-called "Fathers" of the first atomic bomb. Dr. Hoenikker died of the shrapnel in his head. I, Jonah, am the executor of his estate. I inherited his three children, too, when I inherited his estate. I inherited them in my capacity as President of the Research Laboratory of the General Forge and Foundry Company, in Ilium, New York. I was President of the Research Laboratory of the General Forge and Foundry Company when I wrote to my chapter, the Cornell Chapter. So I wrote this letter to Newt: "Dear Mr. Hoenikker: "Or should I say, Dear Brother Hoenikker? "I am a Cornell DU now making my living as a free-lance writer. I am gathering material for a book relating to the first atomic bomb. Its contents will be limited to events that took place on August 6, 1945, the day the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. "Since your late father is generally recognized as having been one of the chief creators of the bomb, I would very much appreciate any anecdotes you might care to give me of life in your father's house on the day the bomb was dropped. "I am sorry to say that I know as much about your illustrious family as I should, and so don't know whether you have brothers and sisters. If you do have brothers and sisters, I should like very much to have their addresses so that I can send similar requests to them. "I realize that you were very young when the bomb was dropped, which is all to the good. My book is going to emphasize the human rather than the technical side of the bomb, so recollections of the day through the eyes of a 'baby,' if you'll pardon the expression, would fit in perfectly. "You don't have to worry about style and form. Leave all that to me. Just give me the bare bones of your story. "I will, of course, submit the final version to you for your approval prior to publication. "Fraternally yours— 5 LETTER FROM A PRE-MED To which Newt replied: "I am sorry to be so long about answering your letter. That sounds like a very interesting book you are doing. I was so young when the bomb was dropped that I don't think I'm going to be much help. You should really ask my brother and sister, who are both older than I am. My sister is Mrs. Harrison C. Conners, 4918 North Meridian Street, Indianapolis, Indiana. That is my home address, too, now. I think she will be glad to help you. Nobody knows where my brother Frank is. He disappeared right after Father's funeral two years ago, and nobody has heard from him since. For all we know, he may be dead now. "I was only six years old when they dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, so anything I remember about that day other people have helped me to remember. "I remember I was playing on the living-room carpet outside my father's study door in Ilium, New York. The door was always being slammed by my father's assistants as they ran back and forth between the Research Laboratory of the General Forge and Foundry Company and the bomb project, Father wouldn't leave Ilium to work on it. He said he wouldn't work on it at all unless they let him work where he wanted to work. A lot of the time that meant at home. The only place he liked to go, outside of Ilium, was our cottage on Cape Cod. Cape Cod was where he died. He died on a Christmas Eve. You probably know that, too. "Anyway, I was playing on the carpet outside his study on the day of the bomb. My sister Angela tells me I used to play with little toy trucks for hours, making motor sounds, going 'burton, burton, burton' all the time. So I guess I was going 'burton, burton, burton' on the day of the bomb; and Father was in his study, playing with a loop of string. "It so happens I know where the string he was playing with came from. Maybe you can use it somewhere in your book. Father took the string from around the manuscript of a novel that a man in prison had sent him. The novel was about the end of the world in the year 2000, and the name of the book was 2000 A.D. It told about how mad scientists made a terrific bomb that wiped out the whole world. There was a big sex orgy when everybody knew that the world was going to end, and then Jesus Christ Himself appeared ten seconds before the bomb went off. The name of the author was Marvin Sharpe Holderness, and he told Father in a covering letter that he was in prison for killing his own brother. He sent the manuscript to Father because he couldn't figure out what kind of explosives to put in the bomb. He thought maybe Father could make suggestions. "I don't mean to tell you I read the book when I was six. We had it around the house for years. My brother Frank made it his personal property, on account of the dirty parts. Frank kept it hidden in what he called his wall safe in his bedroom. Actually, it wasn't a safe but just an old stove flue with a tin lid. Frank and I must have read the orgy part a thousand times when we were kids. We had it for years, and then my sister Angela found it. She read it and said it was nothing but a piece of dirty rotten filth. She burned it up, and the string with it. She was a mother to Frank and me, because our real mother died when I was born. "My father never read the book. I'm pretty sure. I don't think he ever read a novel or even a short story in his whole life, or at least not since he was a little kid. Father was a great man for comics or newspapers, either. I suppose he read a lot of technical stuff he wanted to tell you the truth. I wouldn't know anything about that. That wouldn't be anything he would tell anybody could be interested in reading. That wouldn't be anything he would tell me about. On the other hand, he could be interested in reading about the bomb in his string. "Have you ever tried to reach the people who were trying to reach the people who were trying to reach him by means of his string? Father was never stopped dawdling like an eight-year-old on a spring morning on his way to school. Anything can make me stop and look and wonder, and sometimes learn. I am a very happy man. Thank you. " "Anyway, Father looked at that loop of string for a while, and then his fingers started playing with it. His fingers made the string figure called a 'cat's cradle.' I don't know where Father learned how to do that. From his father, maybe. His father was a tailor, you know, so there must have been thread and string around all the time when Father was a boy. "Making that cat's cradle was the closest I ever saw my father come to playing what anybody else would call a game. He had no use at all for tricks and games and rules that other people made up. In a scrap-book my sister Angela used to keep up, there was a clipping from Time magazine where somebody asked Father what games he played for relaxation, and he said, 'Why his knees on the floor and he said, 'Why hy should I bother with made-up games when there are so many real ones going on?' "He must have surprised himself when he made a cat's cradle out of the string, and maybe it reminded him of his own childhood. He all of a sudden came out of his study and did something he'd never done before. He tried to play with me. Not only had he never played with me before; he had hardly ever even spoken to me. "But he went down on t it all the time. He'd hardly ever even spoken to me. "Anyway, I was playing on the carpet outside his study, making the noise I mouth of Hell. So close up, my father was the ugliest thing I had ever seen. I dream about e." He resumed his place on the carpet, fresh as a daisy after eight hours of sleep. The fraternity house is a poor place for a study class but mo. I'm a very privileged character. They wouldn't let me go to class any more. I was hunked out last week. Anyway, I'm right in the middle of the story of how I flunked my first quiz. I was supposed to be in class at ten o'clock. I was supposed to be interested in the bomb. I was supposed to be interested in the bomb. "Anyway, I was playing on the carpet outside my father's study door in Ilium, New York. The door was always being slammed by my father's assistants as they ran back and forth between the Research Laboratory of the General Forge and Foundry Company and the bomb project, Father wouldn't leave Ilium to work on it. 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