Slaughterhouse-Five by Kurt Vonnegut. © Vonnegut. 1 All this happened, more or less. The war parts, anyway, are pretty much true. One guy I knew really was shot in Dresden for taking a teapot that wasn't his. Another guy I knew really did threaten to have his personal enemies kil
ed by hired gunmen after the war. And so on. I've changed all the names. I really did go back to Dresden with Guggenheim money (God love it) in 1967. It looked a lot like Dayton, Ohio, more open spaces than Dayton has. There must be tons of human bone meal in the ground. I wen
t back there with an old war buddy, Bernard V. O'Hare, and we made friends with a cab driver, who took us to the slaughterhouse where we had been locked up at night as prisoners of war. His name was Gerhard Müller. He told us that he was a prisoner of the Americans for a while.
We asked him how it was to live under Communism, and he said that it was terrible at first, because everybody had to work so hard, and because there wasn't much shelter or food or clothing. But things were much better now. He had a pleasant little apartment, and his daughter wa
s getting an excellent education. His mother was incinerated in the Dresden fire-storm. So it goes. He sent O'Hare a postc ard at Christmastime, and here is what it said: "I wish you and your family also as to your friend Merry Christmas and a happy New Year and I hope that we
'll meet again in a world of peace and freedom in the taxi cab if the accident will." *** I like that very much: "If the accide nt will." I would hate to tell you what this lousy little book cost me in money and anxiety and time. When I got home from the Second World War twenty-three
years ago, I thought it would be easy for me to write about the destruction of Dresden, since all I would have to do w ould be to report what I had seen. And I thought, too, that it would be a masterpiece or at least make me a lot of money, since the subject was so big. But not
many words about Dresden came from my mind then-not enough of them to make a book, anyway. And not many w ords come now, either, when I have become an old fart with his memories and his Pall Malls, with his sons full grown. I think of how useless the Dresden part of
my memory has been, and yet how tempting Dresden has been to write about, and I am reminded of the famous l imerick: There was a young man from Stamboul, Who soliloquized thus to his tool: "You took all my wealth And you ruined my health, And now you won't pee, y
ou old fool." And I'm reminded, too, of the song that goes: My name is Yon Yonson, I work in Wisconsin, I work in a lumbermill there. The people I meet when I walk down the street, They say, "What's your name?" And I say, My name is Yon Yonson, I work in Wisconsin..." A
nd so on to infinity. Over the years, people I've met have often asked me what I'm working on, and I've usuall y replied that the main thing was a book about Dresden. I said that to Harrison Starr, the movie-maker, one time, and he raised his eyebrows and inquired, "Is it an a
nti-war book?" "Yes," I said. "I guess." "You know what I say to people when I hear they're writing anti-war books?" "No. What do you say, Harrison Starr?" "I say, 'Why don't you write an anti-glacier book instead?'" What he meant, of course, was that there would alw
ays be wars, that they were as easy to stop as glaciers. I believe that, too. And even if wars didn't keep c oming like glaciers, there would still be plain old death. *** When I was somewhat younger, working on my famous Dresden book, I asked an old war buddy na
med Bernard V. O'Hare if I could come to see him. He was a district attorney in Pennsylvania. I was a w riter on Cape Cod. We had been privates in the war, infantry scouts. We had never expected to make any money after the war, but we were doing quite well. I ha
d the Bell Telephone Company find him for me. They are wonderful that way. I have this disease late at night sometimes, involving alcohol and the telephone. I get drunk, and I drive my wife away with a breath like mustard gas and roses. And then, speaking grav
ely and elegantly into the telephone, I ask the telep hone operators to connect me with this fr iend or that one, from whom I have not heard in years. I got O'Hare on the line in this way. He is short and I am tall. We were Mutt and Jeff in the war. We were captured toge
ther in the war. I told him who I was on the teleph one. He had no trouble believing it. H e was up. He was reading. Everybody else in his house was asleep. "Listen-" I said, "I'm writing this book about Dresden. I'd like some help remembering stuff. I wonde
r if I could come down and see you, and we coul d drink and talk and remember." H e was unenthusiastic. He said he couldn't remember much. He told me, though, to come ahead. "I think the climax of the book will be the execution of poor old Edgar D
erby," I said. "The irony is so great. A whole city gets burned down, and thousan ds an d t h ousands of people are killed. And then this one American foot soldier is arrested in the ruins for taking a teapot. And he's given a regular trial, and then he's sh
ot by a firing squad." "Um," said O'Hare. "Don't yo u t hink that's really where the climax should come?" "I don't know anything about it," he said. "That's your trade, not mine." *** As a trafficker in climaxes and thrills and characterization
and wonderful dialogue and suspense and confron tations, I had o utlined the Dresden story many times. The best outline I ever made, or anyway the prettiest one, was on the back of a roll of wallpaper. I used my daughter'
s crayons, a different color for each main chara cter. One end of the wallpaper was the beginning of the story, and the other end was the end, and then there was all that middle part, which was the middle. And
the blue line met the red line and then the yell ow line, and the yellow line stopped because the character represented by the yellow line was dead. And so on. The destruction of Dresden was represented b
y a vertical band of orange cro ss-h at c hing, and all the lines that were still alive passed through it, came out the other side. The end, where all the lines stopped, was a beetfield on the Elbe, outside
of Halle. The rain was coming d own. The war in Europe had been over for a couple of weeks. We were formed in ranks, with Russian soldiers guarding us-Englishmen, Americans, Dutchmen, Belgi
ans, Frenchmen, Canadians, S o u th Africans, New Zealanders, Australians, thousands of us about to stop being prisoners of war. And on the other side of the field were thousands of Russians and Poles a
nd Yugoslavians and so on gu ar de d by American soldiers. An exchange was made there in the rain-one for one. O'Hare and I climbed into the back of an American truck with a lot of others. O'Hare didn't have any souv
enirs. Almost everybody else d id. I had a cerem on ial Luftwaffe saber, still do. The rabid little American I call Paul Lazzaro in this book had about a quart of diamonds and emeralds and rubies and so on. He had taken these from dead people in
the cellars of Dresden. So it goe s. An idiotic Englishman, who had lost all his teeth somewhere, had his souvenir in a canvas bag. The bag was resting on my insteps. He would peek into the bag every now and then, and he would roll his eyes and swi
vel his scrawny neck, trying to ca tch people looking cov etously at his bag. And he would bounce the bag on my insteps. I thought this bouncing was accidental. But I was mistaken. He had to show somebody what was in the bag, and he had decided h
e could trust me. He caught my eye, winked, opened the b ag. There was a plaster model of the Eiffel Tower in there. It was painted gold. It had a clock in it. "There's a smashin' thing," he said. And we were flown to a rest camp in France, where we were fed chocolate ma
lted milkshakes and other rich foods until we were all covere d with baby fat. Then we were sent home, and I married a pretty girl who was covered with baby fat, too. And we had babies. And they're all grown up now, and I'm an old fart with his memories and his Pall Malls. My
name is Yon Yonson, I work in Wisconsin, I work in a lum bermill there. Sometimes I try to call up old girl friends on the telephone late at night, after my wife has gone to bed. "Operator, I wonder if you could give me the number of a Mrs. So-and-So. I think she lives at such-an
d-such." "I'm sorry, sir. There is no such listing." "Tha nks, Operator. Thanks just the same." And I let the dog out, or I let him in, and we talk some. I let him know I like him, and he lets me know he likes me. He doesn't mind the smell of mustard gas and roses. "You're all right,
Sandy," I'll say to the dog. "You know that, Sandy? You're O.K." Sometimes I'll turn on the radio and listen to a talk program from Boston or New York. I can't stand recorded music if I've been drinking a good deal. Sooner or later I go to bed, and my wife asks me what time it i
s. She always has to know the time. Sometimes I d on't know, and I say , "Search me." I think about my education sometimes. I went to the University of Chicago for a while after the Second World War. I was a student in the Department of Anthropology. At that time, they were teac
hing that there was absolutely no difference between anybody. They ma y be teaching that still. Another thing they taught was that nobody was ridiculous or bad or disgusting. Shortly before my father died, he said to me, "You know-you never wrote a story with a villain in it." I t
old him that was one of the things I learned in college after the war. *** While I was studying to be an anthropologist, I was also working as a police reporter for the famous Chicago City News Bureau for twenty-eight dollars a week. One time they switched me from the ni
ght shift to the day sh ift, so I worked sixteen hours stra ight. We were supported by all the newspapers in town, and the AP and the UP and all that. And we would cover the courts and the police stations and the Fire Department and the Coast Guard out on
Lake Michigan and a ll that. We were connected to the institutions that supported us by means of pneumatic tubes which ran under the streets of Chicago. Reporters would telephone in stories to writers wearing headphones, and the writers
would stencil the sto ri es on mimeograph sheets. The stories were mimeographed and stuffed into the brass and velvet cartridges which the pneumatic tubes ate. The very toughest reporters and writers were women who had taken
over the jobs of m e n who'd gone to war. An d the first story I covered I had to dictate over the telephone to one of those beastly girls. It was about a young veteran who had taken a job running an old-fashioned elevator in an offic
e building. The elevator door o n the first floor was ornamen tal iron lace. Iron ivy snaked in and out of the holes. There was an iron twig with two iron lovebirds perched upon it. This veteran decided to take his car into the basement, and he close
d the door and started down, but hi s w edding ring was caught in all the or na ments. So he was hoisted into the air and the floor of the car went down, dropped out from under him, and the top of the car squashed him. So it goes. So I phoned this in, and the w
oman who was going to cut the stencil asked me, "What did his wife say?" "She d oe sn't know yet," I said. "It just happened." "Call her up and get a statement." "What?" "Tell her you're Captain Finn of the Police Department. Say you have some sad news. Give her
the news, and see what she says." So I did. She said about what you would expect h er to say. There was a baby. And so on. When I got back to the office, the woman writer asked me, just for her own information, what the squashed guy had looked like when he was
squashed. I told her. "Did it bother you?" she said. She was eating a Three Musketeers Ca ndy Bar. "Heck no, Nancy," I said. "I've seen lots worse than that in the war." *** Even then I was supposedly writing a book about Dresden. It wasn't a famous air raid back then in A
merica. Not many Americans knew how much worse it had been than Hiroshima, for instance. I didn't know that, either. There hadn't been much publicity. I happened to tell a University of Chicago professor at a cocktail party about the raid as I had seen it, about the book I would wr
ite. He was a member of a thing called The Committee on Social Thought. And he told me about the concentration camps, and about how the Germans had made soap and candles out of the fat of dead Jews and so on. All I could say was, "I know, I know. I know." World War Two ha
d certainly made everybody very tough. An d I became a public relations man for General Electric in Schenectady, New York, and a volunteer fireman in the village of Alplaus, where I bought my first home. My boss there was one of the toughest guys I ever hope to meet. He had bee
n a lieutenant colonel in public relations in Baltimore. While I was in Schenectady he joined the Dutch Reformed Church, which is a very tough church, indeed. He used to ask me sneeringly sometimes why I hadn't been an officer, as though I'd done something wrong. My wife a
nd I had lost our baby fat. Those we re our scrawny years. We had a lot of scrawny veterans and their scrawny wives for friends. The nicest veterans in Schenectady, I thought, the kindest and funniest ones, the ones who hated war the most, were the ones who'd really foug
ht. I wrote the Air Force back then, a s king for details about the raid on Dresden, who ordered it, how many planes did it, why they did it, what desirable results there had been and so on. I was answered by a man who, like myself, was in public relations. He said that he w
as sorry, but that the informati o n was top secret still. I read the letter out loud to my wife, and I said, "Secret? My God-from whom?" *** We were United World Federalists back then. I don't know what we are now. Telephoners, I guess. We telephone a lot-or I do, a
nyway, late at night. *** A couple of weeks after I telephoned my old war buddy, Bernard V. O'Hare, I really did go to see him. That must have been in 1964 or so-whatever the last year was for the New York World's Fair. Eheu, fugaces labuntur anni. My name is Yon
Yonson. There was a young man fr om Stamboul. I took two little girls with me, my daughter, Nanny, and her best friend, Allison Mitchell. They had never been off Cape Cod before. When we saw a river, we had to stop so they could stand by it and think about it for
a while. They had never seen water i n that long and narrow, unsalted form before. The river was the Hudson. There were carp in there and we saw them. They were as big as atomic submarines. We saw waterfalls, too, streams jumping off cliffs into the valley of t
he Delaware. There were lots of things to stop and see and then it was time to go, always time to go. The little girls were wearing white party dresses and black party shoes, so strangers would know at once how nice they were. "Time to go, girls," I'd say. And w
e would go. And the sun went down, and we had supper in an Italian place, and then I knocked on the front door of the beautiful stone house of Bernard V. O'Hare. I was carrying a bottle of Irish whiskey like a dinner bell. *** I met his nice wife, Mary, to whom I ded
icate this book. I dedicate it to Gerhard Müll er, the Dresden taxi driver, too. Mary O'Hare is a trained nurse, which is a lovely thing for a woman to be. Mary admired the two little girls I'd brought, mixed them in with her own children, sent them all upstairs to play g
ames and watch television. It was only after the children were gone that I sensed that Mary didn't like me or didn't like something about the night. She was polite but chilly. "It's a nice cozy house you have here," I said, and it really was. "I've fixed up a place whe
re you can talk and not be bothered," she sai d. "Good," I said, and I imagined two leather chairs near a fire in a paneled room, where two old soldiers could drink and talk. But she took us into the kitchen. She had put two straight-backed chairs at a kitchen table wit
h a white porcelain top. That table top was scr eam ing with reflected light from a two-hundred-watt bulb overhead. Mary had prepared an operating room. She put only one glass on it, which was for me. She explained that O'Hare couldn't drink the hard stuff since th
e war. So we sat down. O'Hare was embarrassed , b ut he wouldn't tell me what was wrong. I couldn't imagine what it was about me that could burn up Mary so. I was a family man. I'd been married only once. I wasn't a drunk. I hadn't done her husband any dirt in the
war. She fixed herself a Coca-Cola, made a lot of n oise banging the ice-cube tray in the stainless steel sink. Then she went into another part of the house. But she wouldn't sit still. She was moving all over the house, opening and shutting doors, even moving furniture
around to work off anger. I asked O'Hare what I'd said or done to make her act that way. "It's all right," he said. "Don't worry about it. It doesn't have anything to do with you." That was kind of him. He was lying. It had everything to do with me. So we tried to ignore Ma
ry and remember the war. I took a couple of belts of th e booze I'd brought. We would chuckle or grin sometimes, as though war stories were coming back, but neither one of us could remember anything good. O'Hare remembered one guy who got into a lot of wine in
Dresden, before it was bombed, and we had to take him home in a wheelbarrow. It wasn't much to write a book about. I remembered two Russian soldiers who had looted a clock factory. They had a horse-drawn wagon full of clocks. They were happy and drunk. They w
ere smoking huge cigarettes they had rolled in newspaper . That was about it for memories, and Mary was still making noise. She finally came out in the kitchen again for another Coke. She took another tray of ice cubes from the refrigerator, banged it in the sink, even tho
ugh there was already plenty of ice out. Then she turned to me, let me see how angry she was, and that the anger was for me. She had been talking to herself, so what she said was a fragment of a much larger conversation. "You were just babies then!" she said. "What?" I said. "Yo
u were just babies in the war-like the ones upstairs!" I nodded that this was true. We had been foolish virgins in the war, right at the end of childhood. "But you're not going to write it that way, are you." This wasn't a question. It was an accusation. "I-I don't know," I said. "Well, I kno
w," she said. "You'll pretend you were men instead of babies, and you'll be played in the movies by Frank Sinatra and John Wayne or some of those other glamorous, war-loving, dirty old men. And war will look just wonderful, so we'll have a lot more of them. And they'll be fought b
y babies like the babies upstairs." So then I understood. It was war that made her so angry. She didn't want her babies or anybody else's babies killed in wars. And she thought wars were partly encouraged by books and movies. *** So I held up my right hand and I made her a promi
se: "Mary," I said, "I don't think this book of mine is ever going to be finished. I must have written five thousand pages by now, and thrown them all away. If I ever do finish it, though, I give you my word of honor: there won't be a part for Frank Sinatra or John Wayne. "I tell you what,
" I said, "I'll call it 'The Children's Crusade.'" She was my friend after that. *** O'Hare and I gave up on remembering, went into the living room, talked about other things. We became curious about the real Children's Crusade, so O'Hare looked it up in a book he had, Extraordinary Po
pular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds, by Charles Mackay, LL. D. It was first published in London in 1841. Mackay had a low opinion of all Crusades. The Children's Crusade struck him as only slightly more sordid than the ten Crusades for grown-ups. O'Hare read this handso
me passage out loud: History in her solemn page informs us that the crusaders were but ignorant and savage men, that their motives were those of bigotry unmitigated, and that their pathway was one of blood and tears. Romance, on the other hand, dilates upon their piety and her
oism, and portrays, in her most glowing and impassioned hues, their virtue and magnanimity, the imperishable honor they acquired for themselves, and the great services they rendered to Christianity. And then O'Hare read this: Now what was the grand result of all these struggles?
Europe expended millions of her treasures, and the blood of two million of her people; and a handful of quarrelsome knights retained possession of Palestine for about one hundred years! Mackay told us that the Children's Crusade started in 1213, when two monks got the idea of r
aising armies of children in Germany and France, and selling them in North Africa as slaves. Thirty thousand children vo luntee r ed, thinking they were going to Palestine. They were no doubt idle and deserted children who generally swarm in great cities, nurtured on
vice and daring, said Mackay, and ready for anything. Pope Innocent the Third thought they were going to Palest ine, too, and he was thrilled. "These children are awake while we are asleep!" he said. Most of the children were shipped out of Marseilles, an
d about half of them drowned in shipwrecks. The other half got to North Africa where they were sold. Throu gh a misunderstanding, some children reported for duty at Genoa, where no slave ships were waiting. They were fed and sheltered and q
uestioned kindly by good people there-then given a little money and a lot of advice and sent back home ." Hooray for the good people of Genoa," said Mary O'Hare. I slept that night in one of the children's bedrooms. O'Hare had put a book f
or me on the bedside table. It was Dresden, History, Stage and Gallery, by Mary Endell. It was publish ed in 1908, an d its introdu ction began: It is hoped that this little book will make itself useful. It attempts to give to an English- reading public a bird's-eye vie
w of how Dresden came to look as it does, architecturally; of how it expanded musically, through th e genius of a few me n, to its present bloom; and it calls attention to certain permanent landmarks in art that make its Gallery the resort of those seeking lasting impre
ssions. I read some history further on: Now, in 1760, Dresden underwent siege by the Prussians. On the fifteenth of July began the cannona de. The Picture-Gallery took fire. Many of the paintings had been transported to the Königstein, but some were seriously injur
ed by splinters of bombshells,-notably Francia's "Baptism of Christ." Furthermore, the stately K reuzkirche tower, from w hich the enemy's mo vements had been watched day and night, stood in flames. It later succumbed. In sturdy contrast with the pitiful fate of th
e Kreuzkirche, stood the Frauenkirche, from the curves of whose stone dome the Prussian bo mbs rebounded like rain. Fr iederich was obli ged finally to give up the siege, because he learned of the fall of Glatz, the crit ical point of his new conquests. "We m
ust be off to Silesia, so that we do not lose everything." The devastation of Dresden was bo undless. W hen Goeth e as a yo ung stu dent visited the city, he still found sad ruins: "Von der Kuppel der Frauenk irch e sah ich diese leidigen Trümmer zwis
chen die schöne städtische Ordnung hineingesät; da rühmte mir der Küster die Kunst des Baumeist ers, welc her Kirc he und Kuppel auf einen so unerwünschten Fall schon eingerichtet und bombe nfest e rbaut hatte. Der gute Sakristan deutet
e mir alsdann auf Ruinene nach allen Seiten und sagte bedenklich lakonisch: Das hat de r Feind g ethan!" ** * The tw o little girls and I crossed the Delaware River where George Washington ha d crosse d it, the next morning. We went to t
he New York World's Fair, saw what the past had been like, according to the Ford Moto r Car Co mpany an d Walt D isney, s aw what the future would be like, according to General Motors. An d I asked m yse If about the present: how w
ide it was, how deep it was, how much was mine to keep. *** I taught creative writing i n the fam ous Writ ers Wor kshop a t the University of Iowa for a couple of years after that. I got into some perfec tly beautiful trouble, got ou
t of it again. I taught in the afternoons. In the mornings I wrote. I was not to be distur bed. I wa s workin g on my famous book about Dresden. And somewhere in there a nice man na med Seymou r Lawren ce gave m
e a three-book contract, and I said, "O.K., the first of the three will be my famous bo ok about D resden." The fri ends of Seymour Lawrence call him "Sam." And I say to Sam now: "Sam- here 's the book.
" *** It is so short and jumbled and jangled, Sam, because there is nothing intellige nt to say a bout a m assacre. Everybo dy is su pposed to be dead, to never say anything or want anythi ng ever ag ain. Every thing is su
pposed to be very quiet after a massacre, and it always is, except for the birds. A nd what do th e birds say? All there is to say a bout a massacre, things like "Poo-tee- weet?" *** I hav e told m y sons that t hey are not
under any circumstances to take part in massacres, and that the news of massa cres of enemies is not t o fill the m with s atisfacti on or glee. *** I have also told them not to work for c ompani es which m ake massacr
e machinery, and to express contempt for people who think we need machinery like that. *** As I'v e said: I recentl y went back to Dresden with my friend O'Hare. We had a million la ughs i n Hamburg and West Be
rlin and East Berlin and Vienna and Salzburg and Helsinki, and in Leningrad, t oo. It was very go od for m e, becau se I sa w a lot o f authenti c backgrounds for made-up stories which I will w rite la ter on. On e of them will
be "Russian Baroque" and another will be "No Kissing" and another will be "Dollar Bar" an d anoth er will b e "If th e Accide nt Will," an d so on. And so on. *** There was a Lufthansa plane that was supposed to fly
from Philadelphia to Boston to Frankfurt. O'Hare was supposed to get on in Ph iladelph ia and I was su pposed to get o n in Boston , and off we'd go. But Boston was socked in, so t he plane f lew straight to F
rankfurt from Philadelphia. And I became a non-person in the Boston fo g, and Lufthan sa put me in a l imousi ne with s ome other non-persons and sent us to a m otel for a non -night. The time
would not pass. Somebody was playing with the clocks, and not o nly wi th the electric clocks, but the wind-up kind, too . The second hand on my watch would tw itch once, an d a year would pa
ss, and then it would twitch again. There was nothing I could do about i t. As an Earthlin g, I had to belie ve whatever clocks said-and calendars. *** I had two books wit h me, wh ich I'd meant to rea
d on the plane. One was Words for the Wind, by Theodore Roe thke, and this w hat foun d in ther e: I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow. I feel my fate in wh at I cannot fear. I learn by going
where I have to go. My other book was Erika Ostrovsky's Cé line and His Vision. Céline wa s a brave French sold ier in the First W orld War-until his skull was cracke d. After th at he couldn't sleep, an
d there were noises in his head. He became a doctor, and h e treated po or people in the d aytime, and he wrot e grotesque n o vels all night. No art is possible wit hout a dance with death, he wro
te. The truth is death, he wrote. I've fought nicely against it as long as I could... danc ed with it, festoon ed it, wal tzed it around... decorated it with str ea mers, titillated it... Time obsessed
him. Miss Ostrovsky reminded me of the amazing scene in De ath on the Installme nt Pl an where Célin e wants to st op the bustling of a street crowd . He s creams on paper, Make them
stop... don't let them move anymore at all... There, make them freez e... once and fo r all! ...S o that they won't disap pear anymor e! *** I looked throug h th e Gideon Bible in my motel room
for tales of great destruction. The sun was risen upon the Ear t h when Lot entered i nto Zo-ar, I read. Th en the Lord rai ned upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and
fire from the Lord out of Heaven; and He overthrew those c ities, and all the plain, and all t he inhabitants of the cities, an d that which grew upon the ground. So it goes. Th
ose were vile people in both those cities, as is well known. The world w as better off without the m. And Lot's wife, of course, was t old not t o look back where all those people and th
eir homes had been. But she did look back, and I love her for that, beca use it was s o human . So she was turn ed to a pillar of salt. So it g o es. *** People aren't supposed to look back. I'
m certainly not going to do it anymore. I've finished my war bo ok now. The next one I write is going to be f un. This on e is a failure, and had to be, sinc e it was written by a pillar of salt. It begins like thi
s: Listen: Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time. It ends like this : Poo-t ee-weet? 2 L isten: Billy Pilgrim has com e unstuck in time. Bill y has gone to sleep a senile w idower and awakened on his wedding day. He has
walked through a door in 1955 and come out another one in 1941. He h as gone b ack through that doo r to find himself in 1963. He h as seen h is birth an d death many times, he says, and pays random visi
ts to all the events in between. He says. Billy is spastic in time, has n o contr ol over where he is going next, an d the trips aren' t nec essarily f un. He is in a constant state of stage fright, he says
, because he never knows what part of his life he is going to have to ac t in next. *** Billy wa s born in 1922 i n Ilium, Ne w Yo rk, the o nly child of a barber there. He was a funny-looking c
hild who became a funny-looking youth-tall and weak, and shaped like a bottle of Coca-Cola. He g raduated from Ilium Hig h Schoo l in the upper th ird of his class, and attended night sessions at the I
lium School of Optometry for one semester before being drafted for military s ervice in the Se cond Wor ld War. H is father d ied in a hun ting accide nt durin g the war. So it goes. Billy saw service with the infan
try in Europe, and was taken prisoner by the Germans. After his honorable dis charge fr om the A rmy in 1 945 , Billy agai n enrolled in the Ilium School of Optomet ry. During his senior year there, he became engaged
to the daughter of the founder and owner of the school, and then suffered a mi ld nervous collapse . *** He was treated in a veteran's hospital near Lake Placid, a nd was given shock treatments and released. He marr
ied his fiancée, finished his education, and was set up in business in Ilium by h is father -in-law. Ilium is a particularly good city for optometrist s because the General Forge and Foundry Company is there. E
very employee is required to own a pair of safety glasses, and to wear them in a reas whe re manufact uring is going on. GF&F has sixty-ei ght thou sand employees in Ilium. That calls for a lot of lenses
and a lot of frames. Frames are where the money is. *** Billy became rich. He had two chil dren, Ba r bara and Robert. In time, his dau ghter Ba rbara married another optometrist, and Billy set him u
p in business. Billy's son Robert had a lot of trouble in high school, but then he jo ined the famous Gree n ets. He straightened out , beca me a fine young man, and he fought in Vietnam. Early i
n 1968, a group of optometrists, with Billy among them, chartered an airplane to fly them fr om Ilium to an intern Ber vention o f optometr ist s in Montreal. The plane crashed on top of Sugarbush
Mountain, in Vermont. Everybody was killed but Billy. So it goes. While Billy was rec uperatin g in a hospital in Ver ational con ied accidenta lly of carbon-monoxide poisoning. So it goes. *** When Billy
finally got home to Ilium after the airplane crash, he was quiet for a while. He had a te rrible scar acro ss the top of his mont, his wife d me practice . He ha d a housekeeper. His daughter came over almost every
day. And then, without any warning, Billy went to New York City, and got on an all-nig ht radio prog ram devo ted to talk. skull. He didn't resu He told about havi ng com e unstuck i n time. He said, too, that he had been kidnapped by a flying sau
cer in 1967. The saucer was from the planet Tralfamadore, he said. He was taken to Tra lfamadore, wh ere he wa s dis played naked in a zo o, he said. H e was mate d the
hack. *** Some night owls in Ilium heard Billy on the radio, and one of them called Billy' s daughter Bar bara . Barbara was ups et. She and her husband we nt down to New York and brought Billy home. Billy insisted
mildly that everything he had said on the radio was true. He said he had been kidnapped by the Tralfam adorians on the nig ht of his daug hter's wedd ing. He hadn't been missed, he said, because the Tralfamado
rians had taken him through a time warp, so that he could be on Tralfamadore for years, a nd still be away from Earth for onl y a micro second. An other month went by without incident, and then Billy wrote a le
tter to the Ilium News Leader, which the paper published. It described the creatures from Tr alfamadore. Th e letter sai d that they were two feet hi gh, and gre en, and shaped like plumber's friends. Their suction cups were o
n the ground, and their shafts, which were extremely flexible, usually pointed to the sky. At t he top of each shaft was a li ttle hand w ith a gre en eye in i ts palm. Th e creatures were friendly, and they could see in four dimensions.
They pitied Earthlings for being able to see only three. They had many wonderful things to tea ch Earthlings, e specially about time. Billy promised to tell what s ome o f those wonderful things were in his next letter. *** Billy was working on h
is second letter when the first letter was published. The second letter started out like this: "The most important thing I learned on Tralfamad ore was that whe n a person die s he only appears to die. He is still very much alive in the past, so it is ve
ry silly for people to cry at his funeral. All moments, past, present, and future, always have existe d, always will e xist. The Tralfamad orians can look at all the di fferent mo m en ts just the way we can look at a stretch of the Rocky Mountains, for in
stance. They can see how permanent all the moments are, and they can look at any moment that in terests them. It is just an illusion w e have here on Earth that one mo ment follows another one, like beads on a string, and that once a moment is
gone it is gone forever. "When a Tralfamadorian sees a corpse, all he thinks is that the dead person is in bad condition in t hat particular momen t, but tha t the sa me perso n is just fine in plenty of other moments. Now, when I myself hear that so
mebody is dead, I simply shrug and say what the Tralfamadorians say about dead people, which is 'So i t goes.'" *** And so on. Billy was worki ng on t his lette r in the bas ement rumpus room of his empty house. It was his housekeeper's day off.
There was an old typewriter in the rumpus room. It was a beast. It weighed as much as a storage battery. Billy couldn't car ry it very far very easily, which was why he was writing in the rumpus room instead of somewhere else. The oil bur
ner had quit. A mouse had eaten through the insulation of a wire leading to the thermostat. The temperature in the house w as down to fifty degrees but Billy hadn 't noticed. He wasn't warmly dressed, either. He was barefoot, and still i
n his pajamas and a bathrobe, though it was late afternoon. His bare feet were blue and ivory. The cockles of Bi lly's heart, a t any rate, wer e glowin g coals. W hat made t hem so hot was Billy's belief that he was going to comfort so many peop
le with the truth about time. His door chimes upstairs had been ringing and ringing. It was his daughter Barbara u p there, w anting in. No w she let herself in w ith a ke y, crossed the floor over his head, calling, "Father? Daddy, where are you
?" And so on. Billy didn't answer her, so she was nearly hysterical, expecting to find his corpse. And then she looked into t he very last place there was to lo ok -which was the rumpus room. *** "Why didn't you answer me when I called?
" Barbara wanted to know, standing there in the door of the rumpus room. She had the afternoon paper with her, the one in which B illy described his fri ends from Tralfamadore. "I didn't hear you," said Billy. The orchestration of t
he moment was this: Barbara was only twenty-one years old, but she thought her father was senile, even though he was only f orty-six-s enile because o f damage to his brain in the airplane crash. She also thought that she was head
of the family, since she had had to manage her mother's funeral, since she had to get a housekeeper for Billy, and all that. Also, B arbara a nd her hu sband were having to look after Billy's business interests, which were considerab
le, since Billy didn't seem to give a damn for business any more. All this responsibility at such an early age made her a bitchy flibbertigi bbet. And Billy, meanwhile, was trying to hang onto his dignity, to persuade Barbar
a and everybody else that he was far from senile, that, on the contrary, he wa s devoting himself to a calling much higher than mere bu siness. He was doing nothing less now, he thought, than prescribing corrective lense
s for Earthling souls. So many of those souls were lost and wretched, Billy beli eved, because they could not see as well as his littl e gree n friends on Tralfamadore. *** "Don't lie to me, Father," said Barbara. "I know perfectly
well you heard me when I called." This was a fairly pretty girl, except that she h ad legs like an Edwardian grand piano. Now she raised hell with him about the letter in the paper. She said he was making a laughing stock of himself
and everybody associated with him. "Father, Father, Father-" said Barbara, "wha t are we going to do with you? Are you going t o force us to put you where your mother is?" Billy's mother was still alive. She was in bed in an ol
d people's home called Pine Knoll on the edge of Ilium. "What is it about my lette r that makes you so mad?" Billy wanted to kn ow. "It's all just crazy. None of it's true!" "It's all true." Billy's anger was not going to rise wit
h hers. He never got mad at anything. He was wonderful that way. "There is no su c h planet as Tralfamadore." "It can't be detect ed from Earth, if that's what you mean," said Billy. "Earth can't be detected from Tralfa
madore, as far as that goes. They're both very small. They're very far apart." "Whe re did you get a crazy name like 'Tralfamadore ?'" "That's what the creatures who live there call it." "Oh God," said Barbara, and
she turned her back on him. She celebrated frustration by clappi ng her han ds. "May I ask you a simple question?" "Of cour se." "Why is it y ou never mentioned any of this before the airplane crash?"
"I didn't think the time was ripe." *** And so on. Billy says that he first cam e unstuc k in time in 1944, long before his trip to Tralfamad ore. The Tralfamadorians didn't have anything t
o do with his coming unstuck. They were simply able to give him insights into what was really going on. Billy first came unstuck while W
orld War Two was in progress. Billy was a chaplain's assistant in the war. A ch apl ain's assist ant is customarily a figur
e of fun in the American Army. Billy was no exception. He was powerless to harm th e ene my or to help his friends. I
n fact, he had no friends. He was a valet to a preacher, expected no promotions or medals, b ore no arms, an
d had a meek faith in a loving Jesus which most soldiers found putrid. While on man euv
ers in South Carolina, Billy played hymns he knew from childhood, played the m on a little blac k org
an which was waterproof. It had thirty-nine keys and two stops-vox hum ana and vox celeste. Billy also had charge of a portabl
e altar, an olive-drab attaché case with telescoping legs. I t was lined with crimson plush, and nestled in that passionate plush were an anodi
zed aluminum cross and a Bible. The altar and the org an were made by a vacuum-cleaner company in Camden, New Jersey-and said so. *** O ne time on maneuvers Bill
y was playing "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," with music by Johann Sebastian Bach and words by Martin Luther. It was Sunday morning. Billy and hi s chaplain had gathered a congregation of a
bout fifty soldiers on a Carolina hillside. An umpire a ppeared. There were umpires everywhere, men who said who was winning or losing the theoretical batt le, who was alive and who was dead. The umpire had comical news. Th
e congregation had been theoretically spotted fro m th e air by a theoretical enemy. They were all theoretically dead now. The theoretical corpses laughed and ate a hearty n oontime meal. Remembering this incident years later, Billy was struck by wh
at a Tralfamadorian adventure with death that ha d been, to be dead and to eat at the same time. Toward the end of maneuvers, Billy was given an emergency furlough home because his father, a barber in Ilium, New York, was shot dead by a friend while they were out hunting de
er. So it goes. *** When Billy got back from his furlough, there were orders for him to go overseas. He was needed in the headquarters company of an infantry regiment fighting in Luxembourg. The regimental chaplain's assistant had been killed in action. So it goes. When Billy joine
d the regiment, it was in the process of being destroyed by the Germans in the famous Battle of the Bulge. Billy never even got to meet the chaplain he was supposed to assist, was never even issued a steel helmet and combat boots. This was in December of 1944, during the last mi