

LUANA THE LIVING

By Ray Bradbury

Before I conclude this mundane existence, bid the terrors of the alien farewell, and take my leave of all things light and dark, I must tell to someone the reason for my suicide. A horror clings malignantly to my brain, and far back in the recesses of the subconscious it burns like the pale flame of a candle in the tombs of the dead. It steals my strength and leaves me weak and trembling like a child. Try as I will, I can not rid myself of it, for the night of the full Moon forces its return.

I am seated here in the dark, silent room waiting. A few feet distant stands the huge grandfather clock that has been in the family for generations, its gaunt face glowing faintly in the blackness, striking out the hours with a low and gentle tone. The ancient timepiece shall accomplish the action I dare not trust to my shaking hand, for at the last stroke of midnight, fifteen minutes hence, a lever shall press the trigger of the revolver bolted to its side, and send a bullet crashing through my heart. While I wait I shall—I must—unburden myself of my tale.

I am an adventurer, my life not one of common experience. But now, at one score and ten, I am an old man, with silver hair and trembling fingers. Fear has chiseled its effects in my face through sunken eye and wrinkles like those in the skin of a mummy. I am a spent and tired ancient, ready to close my coffin lid down and rest for eternity.

Let me go back a year. Let me seek out the days that

have passed, so short a time away, yet so hellishly removed by the constant torture that has made twelve months seem like a century.

In India, back along the mountainous spine of the Himalayas, in a dark region where tigers prowled, I had been deserted by my natives who had babbled of some superstitious legend about "Luana." As I broke my way through a thick wall of brambles, I came across a hirsute individual who squatted cross-legged beneath a tree, puffing gently on his opium pipe. Hoping to gain a guide, I accosted him, but received no answer.

I looked into his eyes, small almond holes in the midst of converging wrinkles, and saw no iris or pupil, just a small expanse of leaden flesh as if the eyeballs had been rolled back in hypnotic sleep by the opium. And he said no word, but swung gently from side to side like a sapling in the summer wind, spurts of smoke blowing from his lips. In a rage at his silence, I shook him until the pipe fell from his mouth. His jaw sprang down and his lips curled back revealing a row of sharp, yellow teeth. My stomach revolted at what I saw. He could not talk, this stranger, for his tongue was blue and shriveled like a dried fig which someone had slit open, its blood withdrawn. A dream-like gibberish issued from far in his throat and I let him loose. Immediately the hands fumbled about on the ground, recovered the pipe, and replaced it in the mouth. He continued his tranquil puffing, blind and speechless, and I withdrew from the vicinity in haste.

For the remainder of the day I cut my way through jungle never explored by white man. Perishing from thirst and hunger, I tried unsuccessfully to follow barely discernible animal paths to a water hole. When I tried to return to the point where I had hacked my way through the bramble barrier, both my path and the strange blind man had vanished. It was almost as if the brambles had grown together in the few scant hours. And when I saw the cut I had made in a tree earlier, I realized the brambles had grown, for the cut had moved upward visibly. This was a land of insanely growing jungle, where plants sprouted,

grew, and died in a week or two. The carpet of vegetation was feet thick and strangely resilient, and the unpleasant jungle was hot and broad and quiet. Not even the bestial cry of a tiger broke the oppressive silence, which pressed its fingers in upon me until I shouted to please my ears, to shock myself back into sanity. When I could no longer stand the strange lack of noise, I would run through brush and mire, slipping and falling and sliding until I was bathed in perspiration, then I would sit and rest and watch the mud on my shoes dry and form into crooked cakes.

And still no sound. There was some grim thing that fettered this tree-bounded terrain in soundless monotony.

As the sun floated briefly on the ocean of leaves and branches and vanished in the West, I realized that this was a place apart, undisturbed by the outer world which it repulsed by its wall of thorns. There were few water holes and animals in the land of silence, and the natives were furtive and rarely seen. I dimly recalled strange tales of them and this region, about practices that took place in the light of the full Moon.

As twilight came the cavern of space sprouted points of light that were the stars. Hours passed and the hushed night became sprinkled with more and more of the silver points until a veritable blanket of light diffused the dome of heaven. As I sat and gazed upward through the trees toward them, I sensed a movement about me. It seemed that the whole forest was stirring to life. Little leaves slithered under foot, slender saplings wavered and shook, and the mighty jungle giants themselves bestirred and fluttered their leaves to the ground. In the dark it seemed that things grew threefold the speed of daylight, shot up and bloomed by some mysterious means. The trees broke the silence with a faint rustling and the underbrush writhed with evil life. I arose and moved on as through a bog, the rot under foot hindering me until I fell forward and sprawled with my face in the soil.

Suddenly as I lay there, it seemed that tendrils swept up and clung to me, caressed my neck in an unrelenting grip

until I strangled and gasped for air. Knotted vines wrapped swiftly on my forehead and pressed my temples until a stabbing pain flickered through me. I tore at my throat, freeing it with feeble gestures of the clutching things, and staggered to my feet. Desperately I stumbled on, until my foot struck water unexpectedly, and I ventured forward until the chill liquid reached my knees.

My terrors was forgotten as I dropped to my knees in the scummy water and brushed aside the web-like debris. Ripples quivered under hand, and as I bent I saw the stars reflected in its surface like dancing fireflies. I gulped in huge mouthfuls and wetted my forehead and my temples to ease the heated pain that dwelt there. Then I lay back and floated in the pool, watching the water caress my tattered boots and puttees.

How long I lay and relaxed I know not. When I emerged, dripping, I had found a new strength that grew by the minute. I stripped the torn shirt from me and soaked it in the water, then twisted it and tied it about my head so that its moisture would keep me comfortable for a while. The water clung to my skin, shimmering like a grayish slime.

Intrigued by the dark now, my terror vanished, and I moved forward among the leaping tendrils. Tiny rustlings, the secretive murmuring of water and soil, the high-pitched crackle of branches sounded and the jungle was a living, breathing creature that I walked upon. Then before me I could see a clearing where dark shapes poised in a circle in its gloomy depth.

I stopped suddenly, as if frozen by a sudden blast of wintry wind. I squinted at the shapes crouching on the ground in the clearing. It seemed that I saw a double score of stone statues imbedded in the soil, squatting and waiting, malignant. In the center crouched another presence, alone on the sodden surface.

A light flecked the tree tops a moment later. As the seconds passed by the full sphere of the Moon ascended the star-sprinkled vault inch by inch. It saturated the clearing with silver and brought forth the crouching

shapes like silhouettes on the jungle floor.

Something moved. A figure shifted, and realization of what I saw came to me. These were men! Men, waking as if from sleep, one by one. A soft soughing sound as of wind stirring through myriads of leaves arose as the Moon ascended. I advanced slowly, quietly, toward the clearing. The creatures on the ground stretched long, thin limbs, and knelt upon their knees, all bowing toward the Moon in the crystal-clear sky, all with their emaciated backs toward me.

They seemed creatures of some hypnotic spell, their movements drug-like, as they raised their fingers and gesticulated toward the lunar world that swung from the trees, a disc of blinding white. It was a scene painted in platinum. The Moon dominated the sky and the stars paled to insignificance in its white fire. Now the members of the cult arose and swayed from side to side, swinging their hands and lamenting with deep-chested sounds.

They swung about swiftly, undulated and leaped and danced, the ground throbbing under their bare feet. In a circle they moved, hurtling up and slapping their palms together and weeping. They chanted and screamed and beat their bodies and swept by me without seeing. Like gnarled trees sprung to life they move, naked and brown. But it was their eyes that caused me to fear. For they were leaden and white without pupils, as if burned to that sickly colour by exposure to some changing light, as if dyed by the light of the Moon!

One man, standing in the center of the racing throng, stood and motioned to the Moon, and I recognized him as the stranger I had accosted that morn, the man with the shrunken tongue and blind eyes! He was gibbering and urging his comrades on, and strangely his words became gradually understandable in the tongue of the ancient Hindus.

“Great living Luana! Give us strength, Protect us! Keep from us the unholy spirit of the white man! Destroy the ulcer of the earth, all mankind, those who poison the true faith with their ignorance!”

Overcome with anger, I foolishly stepped into their midst with my revolver in my hand, and commanded them to stop their ritual. They stopped as if struck by lightning! But only for a moment. Then with cries of bestial rage they advanced toward me, imploring the Moon as it hung full suspended above the trees.

"Destroy this invader! Annihilate the ignoble savage who has seen the ritual of Luana!" they pleaded. "Luana lives and breathes! Luana, take revenge for us who are blind yet see your light." I leveled my revolver, praying that the water had not wetted the powder, and fired point blank into one savage heart. With a curse on his lips the man stumbled and fell, throwing me to the ground. From where I lay I saw the others scatter wildly, weaving and vanishing into the jungle. I fired and kept firing until the hammer of my gun clicked harmless. Then I glared about and saw the last native kneeling on the ground and praying.

"I curse this man in the name of living Luana," he sighed. Without another word he sank upon the sward and lay deathly still.

If I had but known the consequences of my action! A fountain of light spurted down as I let my weapon drop, and I looked full into the face of the Moon and gasped. It seemed that it filled the sky with its bulk, flamed with a radiance brighter than the sun, battered me and burned my eyes with its intensity. A wrathful, malignant sphere wavered over me as an evil god, and it seemed that the Moon lived and breathed as did the jungle. It was as though this jungle were the Moon's abode, these natives its disciples in some weird cult.

I remember screaming once, a half-hearted scream of unbelief, and then I ran! Tearing away branches and slogging through marshy ground, I reached the bramble barrier and raised my knife to hack away the thorns. A sudden dizziness whirled over me and I sank down into oblivion. The last thing I viewed was the pulsating pock-marked face of Luana glimmering hot on my eyes.

The next morning I found myself outside the bramble

wall on a familiar trail. My gun was gone and my knife had vanished also, but my mind made itself believe that all had been a nightmare. God, if only it had been!

I returned to civilization immediately, and, chartering a special plane, reached America within the next twenty days. At home, here in the country, overlooking the California coast and the Pacific Ocean, I rested for a few days. But on the night of the next full Moon—

I could no longer sit upon my veranda. A vague warning issued from the vaults of the cratered Moon itself, and squat alien figures seemed to crouch in the shade of the myriad trees. A sibilant and throbbing song like gushing blood echoed and pounded in my ears. My friends left me alone to my musings because of the fear I displayed and an almost fanatical haste to escape the light of the Moon as it dangled, a crescent of unfilled light, in the heavens. The world had left me to my dreaming, my dreadful nightmares, and the errors that assail me.

Of nights I sat bolt upright and quaked to see the moon in all its odious whiteness cling upon the curtain of night to bathe my chamber in platinum. So frightened I became that I summoned a maker of tapestries and instructed him to hang upon the windows curtains of ebon color to shut out forever that pale and sickly-hued torrent of luminescence.

But even though the shades were drawn and the curtains clamped tight, I heard the mourning of wind about the trees like the high-pitched mourning of those devil savages, stirring shadow creatures to life under the spell of earth's satellite. And, growing from full Moon to full Moon, I have heard other sounds, sounds of bestial activity springing up among the shrubs, as if those growths had been stung to live and they cracked and shook with warning. Leaves crunched brittlely on the trees and tore away to flutter impatiently on the sill of my retreat. Noises—noises that confounded and worried me—that urged me to desperation until clammy sweat broke out upon my brow.

And then, twelve moons from that night in the jungle, I

lay in the humid room in the dark, bathed in moisture, waiting for some cool breeze to bring me the sleep that I prayed for. A solid wave of heat crawled over me until all rational thought had fled and I was crazed for a breath of fresh air. I staggered to the curtains, shut my eyes tightly so as not to perceive the Moon in all its somberness. I swept aside the shrouds and threw open the tall window, sucking in my breath, waiting to quaff the chilly night. Instead, a river of noise and a wind born of fire struck me fearfully. The wind harked louder and tore my remaining garments from me as I stood in its beating flames, swept around and burnt as if by some equatorial daylight.

I clutched at the windows, seeking to shut them again, seeking to close off the chatter of leaves and wind and shadows, leaping with evil life. A noise like laughter descended from above, a song of hate from blasphemed Nature; chant of sea and aria of birds, trilling of zephyrs and thunder of tornado, mingled in a rising clangor which hammered at me. Fire burned through me, scorched open my eyes and made me lift my lids to view the Moon where it lay in rafters of clouds. Like some god, titanic and wrathful, silver, its surface boiling like a cauldron, it drowned the sky in bulk and stabbed its colorless disc into my brain. The tempest was a continuous straining to break my ear drums.

Somehow I closed the window, shut out the noise, pulled the curtains tight, and no longer saw the light.

I remember moving dazedly back to my dressing table and standing before my mirror as I switched on the light.

That was a fortnight ago.

The time draws near for the clock to strike twelve, as I sit and write these last few words. In one minute, as the clock strikes out the last note, I shall die.

For a fortnight I have been in this room, never venturing out though I am parched with thirst and hollow with hunger. I have not dared to venture forth.

I am committing suicide because—

Ah, the clock strikes twelve. One! Two! Three! . . .

I am killing myself because when I turned on the light in

my room and looked at myself in the mirror, I saw—
Through a grey film that clouded my eyes I saw a gaping
idiot, eyes leaden and white without pupils, face dead and
thin, mouth dropped open, and my tongue—was a
shriveled black mass lolling between my teeth like a
twisted rag.

I bid you farewell! The clock tolls twelve!

-THE END-