

The Company

We neighbors, sitting on our decks on summer evenings, liked to speculate on the goings-on at what we called, with a certain amount of amusement and even affection, “the Company”, which lay across the brush-covered gulley below us.

Our houses were built more or less at the same level on the side of a hill. They had all been designed and erected by one contractor some twenty years earlier. Each house had a brown wooden balcony that led out from the bedrooms on the second floor. The decks were supported by vertical wooden beams — “stilts” we sometimes called them.

We could see the large green lawn surrounding the plant through the wooden railings that ran around our decks.

Below was a creek bed that only had water in the winter and spring, and was overgrown with small trees and brush. The ground rose on the other side, covered with more brush and small trees up to a vast, perfectly green lawn and in the center of it, a pure white, rectangular building that in an earlier time might have been described as Moderne. From a grove of trees on the left came a straight, level driveway up to the front of the building. Once in a great while we would see a car moving slowly along the driveway. Since we never saw any cars parked in the front of the building — except early in the morning, when we would notice one or two cars parked there — we assumed the parking lot was on the other side.

The contrast between the green lawn and blazing white of the building in the morning was commented on by a number of us.

Beyond the Company the ground rose up to a wooded ridge, then, beyond it, the land sloped down to the ocean. We sometimes referred to the ridge as “our land wave” because we thought of it as a wave cresting in its motionless rush to the ocean to the west.

We never learned the name of the Company — if indeed the organization that occupied the white building had a name at all. The building had two stories, each with a row of windows, wider than they were high. The windows were always covered on the inside with white shades except for one, near the back, which for some reason we never learned or could figure out, in which one side of the shade was bent upward, as though the person who had lowered the shade had not bothered to check that the bottom was level, and thereafter the room had never been used.

Each corner of the building, just below the flat roof, had a blue light that was always on in the morning till the sun was up, and went on in the evening as soon as dusk fell.

Since some of us worked in the computer research industry in the area, we guessed that the grounds were called, with the affectation of the time, “the campus”. But we never found out since we never talked to any of the few people we saw moving around the building, and the one in particular who came out to recreate on the lawn, as will be described in a moment.

The lawn itself was a mystery. It was always perfectly mowed and yet we never once heard the sound of a power mower, nor did we ever see anyone cutting it with an old-fashioned mower. We assumed the landscape work was always done while we were all asleep, and with the use of quiet, electrical mowers. On several occasions, we discussed one of us staying up all night and watching the grounds, but someone pointed out that if there was no moon, we wouldn’t be able to see anything. Then someone proposed our taking turns on all-night shifts for a week or so, but everyone had jobs to go to, so the idea came to nothing.

One of us tried to drive into the driveway and simply park and go in and ask what the name of the Company was (there was no sign in front of the building). Then at least we could look it up in an appropriate directory and find out what business it was involved in. But the driveway had a locked gate and, strangely, no guard. We wondered how customers or visitors got in. Presumably everything was by appointment. We speculated that it might be a government research building.

The only human being we ever saw on the grounds was an amusing character whom we called “the PhD”. He usually appeared in the late afternoon, when we had returned from work. He would walk down the lawn below the plant, obviously deep in thought. He was tall, a bit heavy, with long black hair tied in a pony tail behind. Typically he had on a white shirt, and long checkered shorts — red, green, blue against a white background, though it seemed he never wore exactly the same shorts twice. In the course of the half hour or so he spent on the lawn, his walk would sometimes gradually become more bizarre: now an occasional skip, as though he had just had a brilliant thought, then a little dance. Then sometimes he would hit a rubber ball with the flat paddle he carried with him, retrieve the ball, and hit it again, doing this with the same concentration as when he had been merely walking across the grass. Then, after half an hour or so, he would troop up the lawn and disappear around the back of the building.

And so we enjoyed our evening drinks, talked to each other across our wooden railings, all the while casually looking at the white building and the beautiful green lawn.

Eventually, the PhD no longer appeared. We had no idea why.

Then one Saturday morning a bulldozer came rumbling along the driveway, its scoop held high in the air like a scorpion’s claw, and went around to the opposite side of the building. Soon we saw smoke and dust rising, then, in a few hours, nothing.

And that was that. To this day, the splendid white block of a building stands there, with its perfect lawn, its shades all pulled down except for the one at the rear, and not a soul in sight. Our land wave hurtles toward the great ocean beyond and we enjoy our evening drinks as we sit on our decks and talk about the kids and the absurdities of company management.