The Anguished and the Enchanted

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Trouble at Home:  
The Baobabs and the Flower

One day, the boy told the pilot about the dreadful [hirvittävät] baobab trees [le drame des baobabs].

As if taken by fright, the boy asked if sheep ate small bushes.

“Sure,” the pilot said.

And the boy replied: “Then they must also eat baobab trees.”

But the pilot told the boy that baobabs were not small bushes. They were actually quite large, and could not be eaten even by a herd of elephants.

The idea of a herd of elephants made the whole desert ring out with the sound of the child’s laughter.

“I would have to stack them on top of each other,” said the boy, mysteriously, adding, “Before baobabs grow, they start small.”

The pilot asked why the boy wanted the sheep to eat small baobabs and the boy explained that, where he came from, there were good and bad plants. Good seeds came from good plants.
and bad seeds came from bad plants, just like people [kuten ihmisten].¹

“But seeds,” he said, “are invisible. They hide away deep in the soil, until one of them wakes up and reaches out toward the sun. If the seed becomes a radish or rose bush, it can grow wherever it likes. But if it is a bad seed, and becomes a bad plant, then it must be destroyed instantly and at all costs.”

The most evil seeds were the seeds of the baobab tree. The soil of Asteroid B-261 was infested with them. And you can never get rid of a baobab tree if you do not kill it in its infancy. It spreads over the whole planet, cutting through the very core. And if the planet is small, like the boy’s, its roots will split the planet in two.

“It is a matter of being disciplined [kuritusta],” said the boy. “After you have washed up in the morning [pesun aamulla], then you must wash up your planet. You must pull out all baobabs, as soon as you can see them, which is very difficult, because, when they are young, they look just like rosebushes.”

The boy then told the pilot to make a drawing of baobabs so that the children of Earth might learn that putting off work is all right sometimes, but when it concerns baobabs and bad things, doing so leads to catastrophe.

So the pilot made his drawing, and it was the greatest drawing he had ever made. He vowed to warn children of the dangers of baobabs.

Indeed, he was anguished [tuskallinen] to realize that everyone he knew, and he, himself, had been neglectful of baobabs their entire lives, and had therefore been living in terrible danger.

¹ The addition of the comparison to people is not in Saint-Exupéry’s text, but may well be implied, depending upon one’s reading.
As the pilot drew the baobab, he felt himself driven by a sense of urgency that was extraordinarily powerful [erityisen vahva].

The pilot learned that the boy had lived a small, sad life. His only pleasure had been to watch the sun set, and when the boy asked the pilot to join him in watching a sunset in plain daylight, the pilot had to remind him that, on Earth, you have to wait until it is almost night.

The boy replied, “I always forget I am not at home!” and the pilot understood immediately what he meant. In the boy’s tiny world, you can see a sunset, and another, and another, whenever you like.

The boy said that, one day, he watched fifty sunsets: “I love to watch the sunset,” he said, “especially when I am sad.”

“Why are you sad?” asked the pilot, but the boy didn’t answer.

The next day, the boy asked the pilot if sheep ate flowers as well as bushes.

The pilot answered that sheep will eat anything they can find.

“Even flowers with thorns?” the boy asked.

“Yes,” the pilot replied.

“What use are the thorns?” wondered the boy.

The pilot was trying to loosen a bolt on his engine. He was worried that the damage to his plane was beyond his ability to re-
pair. And his dwindling water supply left him with a constant terror of death [kuoleman kauhu].

The boy, who never let go of a question once he got it in his head, insisted, despite the circumstances: “What use are the thorns?!”

Out of frustration, the pilot replied in a fit of pique: “They’re of no use at all! Flowers have them just for spite.”

The boy seemed very upset: “I don’t believe you. Flowers are helpless. They must believe their thorns make them powerful.”

The pilot did not answer because he was preoccupied with his engine.

The boy interrupted him again and asked about the flowers.

Now the pilot became furious at the boy and wished he would vanish into the desert and leave him in peace. He shouted: “I’m busy with important things!”

The boy stared at him for what seemed like an eternity, finally to say: “Now you sound just like an adult.”

At the sound of these words, the pilot felt deeply ashamed.

The boy continued: “You mix everything up! You get everything wrong!”

The pilot was not sure what the boy meant, but he felt a familiar anguish growing inside of him.

“I know a man who has never smelled a flower” the boy continued. “He has never even looked at a star. He has never loved anyone. He has never done anything but add up numbers, repeating, just like you, ‘I’m busy with important things!’”
The boy was now pale with rage: “Flowers have been growing thorns for millions of years. Sheep have been eating them for millions of years. And you think it’s not important to understand why flowers grow thorns? The war between flowers and sheep is not important? If I knew of a singular flower that grew nowhere but on my planet, and one sheep could kill it with a single bite, without even realizing what it was doing, would you think that is also not important?!”

Then the boy blushed, but continued: “If somebody loves a flower that lives on only one star in all the universe, he’ll be happy when he looks at all the stars. He’ll say, ‘My flower is out there, somewhere.’ But if a sheep eats the flower, then the light of every star will be extinguished. And you think that is not important?!”

The boy could speak no more. He broke down in tears.

Night had fallen and the pilot had already dropped his tools to the ground.

In that moment, the boy’s anger was enchanting, and the pilot felt free of care for his hammer and his bolt, for his engine, for his thirst, even for his own life, because, on Earth, at that moment, there was a boy who needed comforting. So the pilot hugged him tightly and said: “I won’t let your flower die. I’ll make a muzzle for your sheep and a fence to put around your flower.”

But the pilot couldn’t comfort the boy. He couldn’t reach him, for it is a mysterious and secret place: the world of a child’s tears [lapsen kyy nelien maailma / le pays des larmes].”

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The pilot thought a great deal about the flower of which the boy had spoken. Where the boy came from, flowers were typically
small and unremarkable. They would appear in the morning, and, by night, they would pass away.

One day, the boy told, a twig sprouted from the soil, and the boy watched it carefully, as it seemed different from other twigs and might have been a new form of baobab.

But the twig stopped growing, and, instead, started to flourish. The boy knew he was witnessing something miraculous, for the flower took ages to grow. It was as if the flower were not content to be small and unremarkable, as if it were choosing each of its colors and the orientation of each of its petals one by one. Its coquetry [kotelo / très coquette] stretched out the process for weeks.

Then, one morning, at dawn, it showed itself and said, yawning: “Please forgive my appearance. I have just woken up and am most unkempt.”

The boy could not contain his admiration: “How beautiful you are!” he exclaimed.

“Yes, indeed,” said the flower. “And I was born at the same time as the sun.”

Although the boy could see that the flower was anything but modest, he found it so lovely!

“It is time for breakfast now,” the flower said. “Please find something for me and kindly consider my needs with care.”

The boy obliged, found some fresh water, and served the flower.

But soon the boy began to get annoyed by the flower’s vanity [turhamaisuus]. The flower dared tigers to attack it, for it assumed its thorns to be immensely powerful [vahva].
The boy said there were no tigers on his planet and that, anyway, tigers did not eat weeds.

The flower objected that it was nothing like a weed and said: “I am not afraid of tigers, but I am terrified of wind. Will you build a windscreen for me?”

“This flower is very complicated,” thought the boy. “A plant afraid of wind…that’s odd.”

“And at night,” the flower demanded, “you must put me under a glass cover. It is cold here. Where I come from….”

But then the flower had to interrupt itself, humiliated, for it had never been anywhere else, and was caught in a lie. It coughed exaggeratedly three times to return the boy’s attention to its needs and to the boy’s negligence.

“My windscreen?” it prodded.

And the flower coughed again.

So the boy, who loved the flower, also came to hate it. He had been fooled by its beauty, and he became deeply unhappy [masentunut / malheureux].

“I should not have listened to it,” the boy told the pilot. “You should never listen to flowers, only look at them and smell them. My flower made my entire planet smell good. But I didn’t know how to love it only in this way.

“The flower’s fear of cold and wind, which annoyed me so much, should have made me feel only more love. I didn’t understand!

“I should have ignored its vanity and thanked it for its beauty and scent. I should never have left it. I should have known that it cared for me even though it never showed it. Flowers are so confusing. I didn’t know.”
The boy escaped his planet with the help of a flock of migrating geese. First, he set his house in order. He cleaned out his two active volcanoes, which were useful in warming his breakfasts. He also cleaned his dormant volcano, for, as he said: “One never knows.” He pulled up all visible roots of baobab, all the while knowing that, after he left, they would overrun his planet.

When he picked up the flower’s glass cover for the final time, he found himself on the verge of tears.

He said goodbye to the flower, but the flower said nothing.

“Goodbye” the boy repeated, but the flower only forced out some coughs, as it had done before.

But then, the flower said, “I have been foolish. Forgive me. Go and be happy.”

The boy was surprised that the flower didn’t reproach him or make him feel guilty, as it had done all its life.

“I love you,” said the flower. “It’s my fault that you haven’t known all this time. But you have been foolish, too, like me. Go and be happy. Don’t put the glass cover over me. I don’t want it.”

The boy objected that the wind and the animals might hurt the flower, but the flower replied: “I am not really sick. The fresh air will do me good. I’m a flower, after all. And as for the animals, you have to tolerate a few caterpillars if you want to get to know a butterfly. Who else will visit me after you leave? For the other animals, I have my thorns.”

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2 In Saint-Exupéry’s text, there is no indication that the migrating birds were geese, merely oiseaux sauvages [wild birds].
Then, quite powerfully [vahvasti], it shouted: “Stop drooping like that. It's annoying. You have decided to leave me. So, go!”

The boy supposed that the flower said all this because it didn’t want be seen crying, as it was truly a vain flower [todella turha kukka / fleur tellement orgueilleuse].