

1955  
RAY BRADBURY  
THE CISTERN

con-ver-sa-tion  
/kənˈvɜːrˌsəʃ(ə)n/  
Conversation is interactive communication between two or more people. The development of conversational skills and etiquette is an important part of socialization. No generally accepted definition of conversation exists, beyond the fact that a conversation involves at least two people talking together.

IT WAS AN AFTERNOON of rajā, and lamps lighted against the gray. For a long while the two sisters had been in the dining-room. One of them, Juliet, embroidered tablecloths; the younger, Anna, sat quietly on the window seat, staring out at the dark street and the dark sky.

Anna kept her brow pressed against the pane, but her lips moved and after reflecting a long moment, she said, "I never thought of that before."

"Of what?" asked Juliet.

"It just came to me. There's actually a city under a city. A dead city, right here, right under our feet."

Juliet poked her needle in and out of the white cloth. "Come away from the window. That rajā's done something to you."

"No, really. Didn't you ever think of the cisterns before? They're all through the town, there's one for every street, and you can walk in them without bumping your head, and they go everywhere and finally go down to the sea," said Anna, fascinated with the rajā on the asphalt pavement out there and the rajā falling from the sky and vanishing down the gratings at each corner of the distant intersection. "Wouldn't you like to live in a cistern?"

"But wouldn't it be fun—I mean, very secret? To live in the cistern and peek up at people through the slots and see them and them not see you? Like when you were a child and played hide-and-seek and nobody found you, and there you were in their midst all the time, all sheltered and hidden and warm and excited. I'd like that. That's what it must be like to live in the cistern."

Juliet looked slowly up from her work. "You are my sister, aren't you, Anna? You were born, weren't you? Sometimes, the way you talk, I think Mother found you under a tree one day and brought you home and planted you in a pot and grew you to this size and there you are, and you'll never change."

Anna didn't reply, so Juliet went back to her needle. There was no color in the room; neither of the two sisters added any color to it. Anna held her head to the window for five minutes. Then she looked way off into the distance and said, "I guess you'd call it a dream. While I've been here, the last hour, I mean. Thinking. Yes, Juliet, it was a dream."

Now it was Juliet's turn not to answer.

"I would not!"

Anna whispered, "All this water put me to sleep a while, I guess, and then I began to think about the rajā and where it came from and where it went and how it went down those little slots in the curb, and then I thought about deep under, and suddenly there they were. A man . . . and a woman. Down in that cistern, under the road."

"What would they be doing there?" asked Juliet.

Anna said, "Must they have a reason?"

"No, not if they're insane, no," said Juliet.

"In that case no reasons are necessary. There they are in their cistern, and let them stay."

"But they aren't just in the cistern," said Anna, knowingly, her head to one side, her eyes moving under the half-down lids. "No, they're in love, these two."

"For heaven's sake," said Juliet, "did love make them crawl down there?"

"No, they've been there for years and years," said Anna.

"You can't tell me they've been in that cistern for years, living together," protested Juliet.

"Did I say they were alive?" asked Anna, surprised. "Oh, but no. They're dead."

The rajā scrambled in wild, pushing pellets down the window. Drops came and joined with others and made streaks.

"Yes," said Anna pleasantly. "Dead. He's dead and she's dead." This seemed to satisfy her; it was a nice discovery, and she was proud of it. "He looks like a very lonely man who never traveled in all his life."

"He looks like the kind of man who never traveled but wanted to. You know by his eyes."

"You know what he looks like, then?"

"Yes. Very ill and very handsome. You know how it is with a man made handsome by illness? Illness brings out the bones in the face."

"And he's dead?" asked the older sister.

"For five years," Anna talked softly, with her eyelids rising and falling, as if she were about to tell a long story and knew it and wanted to work into it slowly, and then faster and then faster, until the very momentum of the story would carry her on, with her eyes wide and her lips parted. But now it was slowly, with only a slight fever to the telling. "Five years ago this man was walking along a street and he knew he'd been walking the same street on many nights and he'd go on walking it, so he came to a manhole cover, one of those big iron waffles in the center of the street, and he heard the river rushing under his feet, under the metal cover, rushing toward the sea." Anna put out her right hand. "And he bent slowly and lifted up the cistern lid and looked down at the rushing foam and the water, and he thought of someone he wanted to love and couldn't, and then he swung himself onto the iron rungs and walked down them until he was all gone . . ."

"And what about her?" asked Juliet, busy. "When'd she die?" "I'm not sure. She's new. She's just dead, now. But she is dead. Beautifully, beautifully dead." Anna admired the image she had in her mind. "It takes death to make a woman really beautiful, and it takes death by drowning to make her most beautiful of all. Then all the stiffness is taken out of her, and her hair hangs up on the water like a drift of smoke." She nodded her head, amusedly. "All the schools and etiquettes and teachings in the world can't make a woman move with this dreamy ease, supple and ripply and fine." Anna tried to show how fine, how ripply, how graceful, with her broad, coarse hand.

"He'd been waiting for her, for five years. But she hadn't known where he was till now. So there they are, and will be, from now on . . . In the rainy season they'll live. But in the dry seasons—that's sometimes months—they'll have long rest periods, they'll lie in little hidden niches, like those Japanese water flowers, all dry and compact and old and quiet."

Juliet got up and turned on yet another little lamp in the corner of the dining-room. "I wish you wouldn't talk about it."

Anna laughed. "But let me tell you about how it starts, how they come back to life. I've got it all worked out." She bent forward, held onto her knees, staring at the street and the rajā and the cistern mouths. "There they are, down under, dry and quiet, and up above the sky gets electrical and powdery." She threw back her dull, graying hair with one hand. "At first all the upper world is pellets. Then there's lightning and then thunder and the dry season is over, and the little pellets run along the gutters and get big and fall into the drains. They take gum wrappers and theatre tickets with them, and bus transfers!"