

A Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence
gondozásában 1963-ban megjelent kötet
faksimile kiadása

CAT'S CRADLE

KURT
VONNEGUT, Jr.

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DELACORTE PRESS/SEYMOUR LAWRENCE
New York

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MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

*For Kenneth Littauer,
a man of gallantry and taste.*

Nothing in this book is true.

“Live by the *foma** that make you
brave and kind and healthy and happy.”

The Books of Bokonon. I: 5

* *Harmless untruths*

CAT'S CRADLE

ONE

The Day the World Ended

Call me Jonah. My parents did, or nearly did. They called me John.

Jonah—John—if I had been a Sam, I would have been a Jonah still—not because I have been unlucky for others, but because somebody or something has compelled me to be certain places at certain times, without fail. Conveyances and motives, both conventional and bizarre, have been provided. And, according to plan, at each appointed second, at each appointed place this Jonah was there.

Listen:

When I was a younger man—two wives ago, 250,000 cigarettes ago, 3,000 quarts of booze ago . . .

When I was a much younger man, I began to collect material for a book to be called *The Day the World Ended*.

The book was to be factual.

The book was to be an account of what important Americans had done on the day when the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, Japan.

It was to be a Christian book. I was a Christian then.

I am a Bokononist now.

I would have been a Bokononist then, if there had been anyone to teach me the bittersweet lies of Bokonon. But Bokononism was unknown beyond the gravel beaches and coral knives that ring this little island in the Caribbean Sea, the Republic of San Lorenzo.

We Bokononists believe that humanity is organized into teams, teams that do God's Will without ever discovering what they are doing. Such a team is called a *karass* by Bokonon, and

the instrument, the *kan-kan*, that brought me into my own particular *karass* was the book I never finished, the book to be called *The Day the World Ended*.

TWO

Nice, Nice, Very Nice

"If you find your life tangled up with somebody else's life for no very logical reasons," writes Bokonon, "that person may be a member of your *karass*."

At another point in *The Books of Bokonon* he tells us, "Man created the checkerboard; God created the *karass*." By that he means that a *karass* ignores national, institutional, occupational, familial, and class boundaries.

It is as free-form as an amoeba.

In his "Fifty-third Calypso," Bokonon invites us to sing along with him:

Oh, a sleeping drunkard
 Up in Central Park,
 And a lion-hunter
 In the jungle dark,
 And a Chinese dentist,
 And a British queen—
 All fit together
 In the same machine.
 Nice, nice, very nice;
 Nice, nice, very nice;
 Nice, nice, very nice—
 So many different people
 In the same device.

THREE

Folly

Nowhere does Bokonon warn against a person's trying to discover the limits of his *karass* and the nature of the work God Almighty has had it do. Bokonon simply observes that such investigations are bound to be incomplete.

In the autobiographical section of *The Books of Bokonon* he writes a parable on the folly of pretending to discover, to understand:

I once knew an Episcopalian lady in Newport, Rhode Island, who asked me to design and build a doghouse for her Great Dane. The lady claimed to understand God and His Ways of Working perfectly. She could not understand why anyone should be puzzled about what had been or about what was going to be.

And yet, when I showed her a blueprint of the doghouse I proposed to build, she said to me, "I'm sorry, but I never could read one of those things."

"Give it to your husband or your minister to pass on to God," I said, "and, when God finds a minute, I'm sure he'll explain this doghouse of mine in a way that even *you* can understand."

She fired me. I shall never forget her. She believed that God liked people in sailboats much better than He liked people in motorboats. She could not bear to look at a worm. When she saw a worm, she screamed.

She was a fool, and so am I, and so is anyone who thinks he sees what God is Doing, [writes Bokonon].

FOUR

A Tentative Tangling of Tendrils

Be that as it may, I intend in this book to include as many members of my *karass* as possible, and I mean to examine all strong hints as to what on Earth we, collectively, have been up to.

I do not intend that this book be a tract on behalf of Bokononism. I should like to offer a Bokononist warning about it, however. The first sentence in *The Books of Bokonon* is this:

“All of the true things I am about to tell you are shameless lies.”

My Bokononist warning is this:

Anyone unable to understand how a useful religion can be founded on lies will not understand this book either.

So be it.

About my *karass*, then.

It surely includes the three children of Dr. Felix Hoenikker, one of the so-called “Fathers” of the first atomic bomb. Dr. Hoenikker himself was no doubt a member of my *karass*, though he was dead before my *sinookas*, the tendrils of my life, began to tangle with those of his children.

The first of his heirs to be touched by my *sinookas* was Newton Hoenikker, the youngest of his three children, the younger of his two sons. I learned from the publication of my fraternity, *The Delta Upsilon Quarterly*, that Newton Hoenikker, son of of the Nobel Prize physicist, Felix Hoenikker, had been pledged by my chapter, the Cornell Chapter.

So I wrote this letter to Newt:

"Dear Mr. Hoenikker:

"Or should I say, Dear *Brother* Hoenikker?

"I am a Cornell DU now making my living as a free-lance writer. I am gathering material for a book relating to the first atomic bomb. Its contents will be limited to events that took place on August 6, 1945, the day the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima.

"Since your late father is generally recognized as having been one of the chief creators of the bomb, I would very much appreciate any anecdotes you might care to give me of life in your father's house on the day the bomb was dropped.

"I am sorry to say that I don't know as much about your illustrious family as I should, and so don't know whether you have brothers and sisters. If you do have brothers and sisters, I should like very much to have their addresses so that I can send similar requests to them.

"I realize that you were very young when the bomb was dropped, which is all to the good. My book is going to emphasize the *human* rather than the *technical* side of the bomb, so recollections of the day through the eyes of a 'baby,' if you'll pardon the expression, would fit in perfectly.

"You don't have to worry about style and form. Leave all that to me. Just give me the bare bones of your story.

"I will, of course, submit the final version to you for your approval prior to publication.

"Fraternally yours—"

FIVE

Letter from a Pre-med

To which Newt replied:

"I am sorry to be so long about answering your letter. That sounds like a very interesting book you are doing. I was so young when the bomb was dropped that I don't think I'm going to be much help. You should really ask my brother and sister, who are both older than I am. My sister is Mrs. Harrison C. Connors, 4918 North Meridian Street, Indianapolis, Indiana. That is my home address, too, now. I think she will be glad to help you. Nobody knows where my brother Frank is. He disappeared right after Father's funeral two years ago, and nobody has heard from him since. For all we know, he may be dead now.

"I was only six years old when they dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, so anything I remember about that day other people have helped me to remember.

"I remember I was playing on the living-room carpet outside my father's study door in Ilium, New York. The door was open, and I could see my father. He was wearing pajamas and a bathrobe. He was smoking a cigar. He was playing with a loop of string. Father was staying home from the laboratory in his pajamas all day that day. He stayed home whenever he wanted to.

"Father, as you probably know, spent practically his whole professional life working for the Research Laboratory of the General Forge and Foundry Company in Ilium. When the Manhattan Project came along, the bomb project, Father wouldn't leave Ilium to work on it. He said he wouldn't work on it at all unless they let him work where he wanted to work.

A lot of the time that meant at home. The only place he liked to go, outside of Ilium, was our cottage on Cape Cod. Cape Cod was where he died. He died on a Christmas Eve. You probably know that, too.

"Anyway, I was playing on the carpet outside his study on the day of the bomb. My sister Angela tells me I used to play with little toy trucks for hours, making motor sounds, going 'burton, burton, burton' all the time. So I guess I was going 'burton, burton, burton' on the day of the bomb; and Father was in his study, playing with a loop of string.

"It so happens I know where the string he was playing with came from. Maybe you can use it somewhere in your book. Father took the string from around the manuscript of a novel that a man in prison had sent him. The novel was about the end of the world in the year 2000, and the name of the book was 2000 A.D. It told about how mad scientists made a terrific bomb that wiped out the whole world. There was a big sex orgy when everybody knew that the world was going to end, and then Jesus Christ Himself appeared ten seconds before the bomb went off. The name of the author was Marvin Sharpe Holderness, and he told Father in a covering letter that he was in prison for killing his own brother. He sent the manuscript to Father because he couldn't figure out what kind of explosives to put in the bomb. He thought maybe Father could make suggestions.

"I don't mean to tell you I read the book when I was six. We had it around the house for years. My brother Frank made it his personal property, on account of the dirty parts. Frank kept it hidden in what he called his 'wall safe' in his bedroom. Actually, it wasn't a safe but just an old stove flue with a tin lid. Frank and I must have read the orgy part a thousand times when we were kids. We had it for years, and then my sister Angela found it. She read it and said it was nothing but a piece of dirty rotten filth. She burned it up, and the string with it. She was a mother to Frank and me, because our real mother died when I was born.

"My father never read the book, I'm pretty sure. I don't think he ever read a novel or even a short story in his whole

life, or at least not since he was a little boy. He didn't read his mail or magazines or newspapers, either. I suppose he read a lot of technical journals, but to tell you the truth, I can't remember my father reading anything.

"As I say, all he wanted from that manuscript was the string. That was the way he was. Nobody could predict what he was going to be interested in next. On the day of the bomb it was string.

"Have you ever read the speech he made when he accepted the Nobel Prize? This is the whole speech: 'Ladies and Gentlemen. I stand before you now because I never stopped dawdling like an eight-year-old on a spring morning on his way to school. Anything can make me stop and look and wonder, and sometimes learn. I am a very happy man. Thank you.'

"Anyway, Father looked at that loop of string for a while, and then his fingers started playing with it. His fingers made the string figure called a 'cat's cradle.' I don't know where Father learned how to do that. From *his* father, maybe. His father was a tailor, you know, so there must have been thread and string around all the time when Father was a boy.

"Making that cat's cradle was the closest I ever saw my father come to playing what anybody else would call a game. He had no use at all for tricks and games and rules that other people made up. In a scrapbook my sister Angela used to keep up, there was a clipping from *Time* magazine where somebody asked Father what games he played for relaxation, and he said, 'Why should I bother with made-up games when there are so many real ones going on?'

"He must have surprised himself when he made a cat's cradle out of the string, and maybe it reminded him of his own childhood. He all of a sudden came out of his study and did something he'd never done before. He tried to play with me. Not only had he never played with me before; he had hardly ever even spoken to me.

"But he went down on his knees on the carpet next to me, and he showed me his teeth, and he waved that tangle of string in my face. 'See? See? See?' he asked. 'Cat's cradle. See the cat's cradle? See where the nice pussycat sleeps? Meow. Meow.'

"His pores looked as big as craters on the moon. His ears and nostrils were stuffed with hair. Cigar smoke made him smell like the mouth of Hell. So close up, my father was the ugliest thing I had ever seen. I dream about it all the time.

"And then he sang. 'Rockabye catsy, in the tree top'; he sang, 'when the wind blows, the cray-dull will rock. If the bough breaks, the cray-dull will fall. Down will come cray-dull, catsy, and all.'

"I burst into tears. I jumped up and I ran out of the house as fast as I could go.

"I have to sign off here. It's after two in the morning. My roommate just woke up and complained about the noise from the typewriter."

SIX

Bug Fights

Newt resumed his letter the next morning. He resumed it as follows:

"Next morning. Here I go again, fresh as a daisy after eight hours of sleep. The fraternity house is very quiet now. Everybody is in class but me. I'm a very privileged character. I don't have to go to class any more. I was flunked out last week. I was a pre-med. They were right to flunk me out. I would have made a lousy doctor.

"After I finish this letter, I think I'll go to a movie. Or if the sun comes out, maybe I'll go for a walk through one of the gorges. Aren't the gorges beautiful? This year, two girls jumped into one holding hands. They didn't get into the sorority they wanted. They wanted Tri-Delt.

"But back to August 6, 1945. My sister Angela has told me many times that I really hurt my father that day when I wouldn't admire the cat's cradle, when I wouldn't stay there on the carpet with my father and listen to him sing. Maybe I did hurt him, but I don't think I could have hurt him much. He was one of the best-protected human beings who ever lived. People couldn't get at him because he just wasn't interested in people. I remember one time, about a year before he died, I tried to get him to tell me something about my mother. He couldn't remember anything about her.

"Did you ever hear the famous story about breakfast on the day Mother and Father were leaving for Sweden to accept the Nobel Prize? It was in *The Saturday Evening Post* one time. Mother cooked a big breakfast. And then, when she cleared off the table, she found a quarter and a dime and three pennies by Father's coffee cup. He'd tipped her.

"After wounding my father so terribly, if that's what I did, I ran out into the yard. I didn't know where I was going until I found my brother Frank under a big spiraea bush. Frank was twelve then, and I wasn't surprised to find him under there. He spent a lot of time under there on hot days. Just like a dog, he'd make a hollow in the cool earth all around the roots. And you never could tell what Frank would have under the bush with him. One time he had a dirty book. Another time he had a bottle of cooking sherry. On the day they dropped the bomb Frank had a tablespoon and a Mason jar. What he was doing was spooning different kinds of bugs into the jar and making them fight.

"The bug fight was so interesting that I stopped crying right away—forgot all about the old man. I can't remember what all Frank had fighting in the jar that day, but I can remember other bug fights we staged later on: one stag beetle against a hundred red ants, one centipede against three spiders, red ants against black ants. They won't fight unless you keep shaking the jar. And that's what Frank was doing, shaking, shaking the jar.

"After a while Angela came looking for me. She lifted up one side of the bush and she said, 'So there you are!' She asked

Frank what he thought he was doing, and he said, 'Experimenting.' That's what Frank always used to say when people asked him what he thought he was doing. He always said, 'Experimenting.'

"Angela was twenty-two then. She had been the real head of the family since she was sixteen, since Mother died, since I was born. She used to talk about how she had three children—me, Frank, and Father. She wasn't exaggerating, either. I can remember cold mornings when Frank, Father, and I would be all in a line in the front hall, and Angela would be bundling us up, treating us exactly the same. Only I was going to kindergarten; Frank was going to junior high; and Father was going to work on the atom bomb. I remember one morning like that when the oil burner had quit, the pipes were frozen, and the car wouldn't start. We all sat there in the car while Angela kept pushing the starter until the battery was dead. And then Father spoke up. You know what he said? He said, 'I wonder about turtles.' 'What do you wonder about turtles?' Angela asked him. 'When they pull in their heads,' he said, 'do their spines buckle or contract?'

"Angela was one of the unsung heroines of the atom bomb, incidentally, and I don't think the story has ever been told. Maybe you can use it. After the turtle incident, Father got so interested in turtles that he stopped working on the atom bomb. Some people from the Manhattan Project finally came out to the house to ask Angela what to do. She told them to take away Father's turtles. So one night they went into his laboratory and stole the turtles and the aquarium. Father never said a word about the disappearance of the turtles. He just came to work the next day and looked for things to play with and think about, and everything there was to play with and think about had something to do with the bomb.

"When Angela got me out from under the bush, she asked me what had happened between Father and me. I just kept saying over and over again how ugly he was, how much I hated him. So she slapped me. 'How dare you say that about your father?' she said. 'He's one of the greatest men who ever lived!

He won the war today! Do you realize that? He won the war! She slapped me again.

"I don't blame Angela for slapping me. Father was all she had. She didn't have any boy friends. She didn't have any friends at all. She had only one hobby. She played the clarinet.

"I told her again how much I hated my father; she slapped me again; and then Frank came out from under the bush and punched her in the stomach. It hurt her something awful. She fell down and she rolled around. When she got her wind back, she cried and she yelled for Father.

"'He won't come,' Frank said, and he laughed at her. Frank was right. Father stuck his head out a window, and he looked at Angela and me rolling on the ground, bawling, and Frank standing over us, laughing. The old man pulled his head indoors again, and never even asked later what all the fuss had been about. People weren't his specialty.

"Will that do? Is that any help to your book? Of course, you've really tied me down, asking me to stick to the day of the bomb. There are lots of other good anecdotes about the bomb and Father, from other days. For instance, do you know the story about Father on the day they first tested a bomb out at Alamo-gordo? After the thing went off, after it was a sure thing that America could wipe out a city with just one bomb, a scientist turned to Father and said, 'Science has now known sin.' And do you know what Father said? He said, 'What is sin?'

"All the best,

"Newton Hoenikker"