

# The Curse

## After Reading

### 1. Remembering the Story

Arthur C. Clarke's story 'The Curse' is very short, but it is hard to summarise what the story is about without retelling it. However, to review the story you might wish to choose **one** of the following tasks:

1. Answer the following questions in as much detail as possible.

- When do you think the story took place?
- Why did the events that immediately precede the story take place?
- Why did the author concentrate on Shakespeare's grave? (Why not somebody else's grave?)
- How likely is it that the events that culminated in the story could happen today?

2. Write a short poem about the story based on one of the following:

- The river
- The gravestone
- The air
- The radiated light

3. Design a picture to go with the story. Be prepared to explain why you think the picture you have designed should be included in a book of short stories containing 'The Curse'.

## 2. Further Reading

Read the following extract from a short story by the contemporary Scottish writer Alison Kennedy. What are the connections with Arthur C. Clarke's story 'The Curse'?

### Not Anything To Do With Love

A.L. Kennedy

I wouldn't want to say so, but it's freezing in here. I suppose most people usually don't notice, not wanting to take their coats off, and being preoccupied, God knows: or this could even be an intentional chill, I mean, the last thing you'd want to consider right now is heat. Still, it doesn't seem a sign of kindness - a cold crematorium - more like forcing the bereaved to do their mourning inside a bad joke.

And, if I think of that, the possibility of giggling does tickle very briefly, but I frown against it, I resist. I do almost always laugh when I shouldn't, in fact *because* I shouldn't. Not that I'm cruel, I don't feel cruel, I've only decided that, since bad things happen without my permission, I will refuse to let them also make me sad.

20 I can't help it, either, the laughing: solemn gatherings, slow ballads, pompous orations, any person or occasion that assumes I'll offer my unreserved respect: I tend to find them all hysterical in the end. Especially if someone similar is there to set me off. They don't have to do much: I recognise what it looks like when somebody's composure starts to strip itself away. They'll maybe cross their arms with that twitchy, shaky, tension, or they'll grab down little wheezes of embarrassed air, or they'll simply hood their face under their palm, trying to hide how fast they're slipping: how fast *we're* slipping, because I'll be weakening with them by then, I'll be just as lost, pulled equally tight against the moment when we both stop caring and let it disgrace us - when we laugh.

I'm sombre though, this morning: on my own and therefore less likely to go astray.

40 The man with the 50s suit and the heavy glasses, he notices me frowning and nods, understanding of a grief that I don't have, because there is no real reason for me to be here. I met the deceased perhaps five times: each one completely unremarkable. He is no more to me than a lanky,

softy variable recollection, the after-image of a friend of friends. He will have had qualities, I'm sure, but I don't know them.

Over by the door, the taller woman with the reddish hair - I think she's the sister - she hinges forward and catches at a teenage boy, hugs him in viciously while she faces something unknowable over his head, robbed eyes still fighting, puzzling. She ought to be somewhere more dignified than this. The cemetery outside seems all but abandoned and, inside, decades of cheap, municipal gloss have drowned out the contours of each moulding, every window frame; there's nothing for her to see that isn't faintly grubby and miserable with soaked-in nicotine.

In fact, being in this building is depressing, which is tautological - the people you'd expect to come here will already *be* depressed.

60 Me, I'm quite chipper, personally, but I would prefer it to be much easier for me to stay that way.

So I worry through the murmuring clusters and out to the corridor where I end up studying, once again, the tiny black pin board on which today's schedule is unevenly displayed, the white plastic letters fixed into a list of surnames and starting times - the current gathering is second out of six. And although everybody possible has surely already arrived, there are still fifteen minutes left to wait. We all, for our various reasons, have turned up too soon and the room behind me is now unsteady - even I can feel - with the concentration of involuntary hope, a habit nobody has shaken yet: the one that expects a final, impossible guest.

I need some space.

80 My breath is visible, even before I step completely beyond the front doors. They are awkwardly stiff and really must trouble the progress of pall-bearers, or biers. That's what I'd guess: I have no intention of loitering until the hearse pulls up just to prove myself right. Me there: a stranger waiting on the doorstep: it would

look odd. The whole facility, anyway, is plainly not funeral-friendly, there's no need for additional evidence. Serve them right, if people start making their own arrangements: dumping off their relatives in rivers, or allotments, or the more accessible beauty-spots.

It's not in good taste to think so, I realise that. But then it's not exactly tasteful to add inconvenience to pre-existing grief - if anyone's being insensitive, it's not me. I should complain. I should write a letter to the relevant authority.

The driveway's shameful, too: all pitted. I have to be quite careful where I walk. And I mustn't consider the fine particulates, the vapours, drifting down from the grey, unsubtle smokestack: gathering in potholes, frozen puddles.

100 Out under the open, I clap my hands together for the sake of warmth and causing a disturbance, showing proof of life, and then I regret it - too loud. A single blackbird flicks over the grass, its little chips of alarm disappearing, muffled in the frost. I could head back to my car and leave this. No one would notice my absence. I'm not needed.

Which is, perhaps, what will make me stay.

To ease the minutes by, I pace out a slow, wide circle over the grass, set an ice dust melting on my shoes. When I pause first, I can see a small disturbance of colour, reddish flowers propped against a stone. Another pause, and I can watch the white depth of new mist unpicking the detail from the trees. Another, and I could see the car park if I felt so inclined, but I do not - there's nothing in it for me.

Back indoors, then: I might as well.

Yes, I might as well go back indoors. I do have other options, but I have no need to choose them, since I'm already here.

120 God, look at the place - it's inexcusable.

Sometimes I wish that my mind would, for once, stop talking, stop telling me what to do.

Back indoors it is, though. Why not. Up the steps, a strong tug, and then through.

And, at once, I can feel the difference, I can tell - I'd hoped this wouldn't happen and I'd hoped it would, and now, whatever my wishes, it has - Paul's here.

I haven't seen him, but I know: while I was walking and not thinking of him and not searching out his car: while I wasn't looking, in he came. Same as ever, without my permission, in he came.

He has no more excuse for attending than I do.

We swapped pleasantries with the dead man together, just those four or five times: we neither of us ever knew his birthday, or his middle initial, or if he enjoyed his job - if he *had* a job. We're here for each other, to do ourselves harm.

140 Which would, of course, hardly matter, if we hadn't once been kind, better than kind.

I mean, I can no longer remember when I first realised that I could tell where Paul was without looking, without being told. Maybe it's a scent thing, like moths finding each other, or turtles - turtles can smell their home from miles away. At the start it was only good: easing through doorways and drawing in while all I could touch was his touch: in the nudge of other bodies, the curves of forward motion on my skin, the warm lean of the walls towards me, the shifts of my mind: everything, him.

This morning is still much the same, reality turning seasick and raw, but when we meet we'll give each other nothing but offence.

I step into the side room, anyway: deeper and deeper: and find, by himself beside the empty fireplace, the man that I used to agree with and who used to agree with me.

160 Paul's expecting me, that's obvious - his back turned pre-emptively away from the open door, his shoulders wary. I think he's gained weight, only a little. The trousers I've never seen before, but that's a jacket I was very used to - for some reason seeing it hurts - and it won't keep him warm enough, not today, it isn't practical. Slip your arm inside it, though, and there will be heat, held close at the small of his back. It was something worth finding, I remember that.

His hands: something else I remember. Even across this distance, they're changing the space between my fingers, making it ache. He's fussing in and 'out of his pockets and, if he's shaking, I'm not close enough to tell. I'm also unwilling to look down at my own hands. We do both tremble too easily and this will be much harder if either of us seems moved, or weak.

180 I would like to pay no attention to his head, the back of his head, his hair. I'd say that he's just had it cut. I'd say that I have the feel of it, singing in my palm like the ghost of some old injury.

Then, walking between us, comes that man with the heavy glasses again, which he now removes softly and rubs with the end of his tie. Next, he peers about and shows the room how the frame has

impressed little grooves in the bridge of his nose and the flesh at his temples.

*Must be too tight. Or maybe his eyesight's perfect, but he had to buy some glasses to fit his grooves.*

A year ago, if I hadn't said it, then Paul would - that's the way we're made. It wouldn't have been meant unpleasantly: the thoughts occurred and we allowed them and they were ours. They only seem unpleasant to think without company.

200 The man slips back into his glasses and moves on and, before I can be ready, Paul moves too, swings round gingerly, as if his body has become uncooperative now, or unsafe. Then, with a yard or so left between us, we both stop and I was expecting this, but still it catches me like a slap: his expression of vehement weariness and contempt, there just for me. Under it, are the traces of what he can't control: there in the mouth, the eyes, the honest places: his absolute anger, his fear, his pain.

And I am quite aware, believe me, that I'm presenting exactly the same kind of face to him.

He breaks off and goes to sit, hunched forward, his elbows leaning on his knees, head dropped. Anyone who saw him might imagine he's exhausted, or upset. Anyone who cared about him would slip over there quietly and stroke his back, or cup his forehead, kneel beside him with their hand braced on his thigh while they asked after his problem and said what they could to make it fade. Anyone who cared.

220 He ducks up slightly, shading his eyes with spread fingers, peering out at me like a boy and then flinching when I look at him, withdrawing again. Which is perfectly natural, because I'm his problem: there is nothing I can do to help him, other than ceasing to be.

And I'm not entirely sure -I want to help. Why should I stop him hurting when he won't stop hurting me.

It went wrong, that's all, completely wrong. First we laughed at strangers and then, being so happy and so much at ease, we laughed at each other and proved we were safe in our hands, because we didn't mean a word. But then a little

jab would meet a jab and a cut would meet a cut and we'd apologise and there would be tenderness, but the kind you only feel when there's a bruise. None of it was intended: no one was really attacking, we were both just defending ourselves.

But we didn't stop. So now we are this: each of us a bad mirror for the other. Not anything better, not anything softer, not anything to do with love.

240 Naturally, I can't say this, because I won't speak to him, because he won't speak to me and vice versa.

I'm getting an angry headache, possibly a migraine. He's my sole trigger for the migraines, I never used to have them before. The stomach cramps, the dreams, the shortened attention span: in a purely pathological way, he's much more a part of me these days than he ever was.

At no signal of which I'm aware, the groups around me start to slide, conversations ending, and the whole crowd shuffling and bumping towards the door.

I won't go out with them, I can't face it. Once they're all in their seats and the music's started, I'm going home: I find I'm too tired for anything else. I walk to face the only window, stare into the pale day, while the room at my back empties, becomes still.

260 I know that he hasn't left, either: I don't have to turn and see. He's sitting behind me, just as he was, his breath now audible in the quiet - I can hear mine, too.

Our situation is ridiculous, laughable, and I want to be able to laugh. The fact that I can't is, in itself, quite funny, if I think about it: quite bizarre that I can lose my own nature so easily, just because he's with me. And it really should be very amusing that this will go on, that I have nothing better, that no matter what, I still want to be sure that we won't leave each other alone.

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