

THE STORY OF THE LITTLE RED LIZARD

by C.S. Lewis

excerpt from *The Great Divorce*: pp. 98-103

This is a dream in which the lost have been taken on a bus ride into the foothills of the kingdom of heaven to see the great difference between that place, and the place where they live. Having been shown the sights, some criticize, argue, and return – but one who chooses to stay is changed, becoming like an angel.¹ Our narrator stumbles onto the following scene.

... I saw coming towards us a Ghost [a visitor from “hell”] who carried *something* on his shoulder. Like all the Ghosts, he was insubstantial, but they differed from one another as smokes differ. Some had been whitish; this one was dark and oily.

What sat on his shoulder was a *little red lizard*, and it was twitching its tail like a whip and whispering things in his ear. As we caught sight of him he turned his head to the reptile with a snarl of impatience.

“Shut up, I tell you!” he said. It wagged its tail and continued to whisper to him. He ceased snarling, and presently began to smile. Then he turned and started to limp westward, away from the mountains [“heaven”].

“Off so soon?” said a voice. The speaker was more or less human in shape but larger than a man, and so bright that I could hardly look at him. His presence smote on my eyes and on my body too (for there was heat coming from him as well as light) like the morning sun at the beginning of a tyrannous summer day.

“Yes. I’m off,” said the Ghost. “Thanks for all your hospitality. But it’s no good, you see. I told this little chap,” (here he indicated the lizard), “that he’d have to be quiet if he came – which he insisted on doing. Of course his stuff won’t do here: I realize that. But he won’t stop. I shall just have to go home.”

“Would you like me to make him quiet?” said the flaming Spirit – an angel, as I now understood.

“Of course I would,” said the Ghost.

“Then I will kill him,” said the Angel, taking a step forward.

“Oh – ah – look out! You’re burning me. Keep away,” said the Ghost, retreating.

“Don’t you *want* him killed?”

¹ CS Lewis admitted that he was not a theologian, but a writer. This particular book is not an analogy of biblical truth, but a mythological exploration of an unseen realm. Lewis’ books and stories have an assortment of Calvinist, Wesleyan, and Roman Catholic beliefs that nonetheless manage to expose the heart of Christianity – W.H. Gross www.onthewing.org.

“You didn’t say anything about *killing* him at first. I hardly meant to bother you with anything so drastic as that.”

“It’s the only way,” said the Angel, whose burning hands were now very close to the lizard.
“*Shall I kill it?*”

“Well, that’s a further question. I’m quite open to consider it, but it’s a new point, isn’t it? I mean, for the moment I was only thinking about silencing it because up here – well, it’s so damned embarrassing.”

“*May I kill it?*”

“Well, there is time to discuss that later.”

“*There is no time. May I kill it?*”

“Please, I never meant to be such a nuisance. Please – really – don’t bother. Look! It’s gone to sleep of its own accord. I’m sure it’ll be all right now. Thanks ever so much.”

“*May I kill it?*”

“Honestly, I don’t think there’s the slightest necessity for that. I’m sure I shall be able to keep it in order now. I think the gradual process would be far better than killing it.”

“The gradual process is of no use at all.”

“Don’t you think so? Well, I’ll think over what you’ve said very carefully. I honestly will. In fact I’d let you kill it now, but as a matter of fact I’m not feeling frightfully well today. It would be silly to do it *now*. I’d need to be in good health for the operation. Some other day, perhaps.”

“*There is no other day. All days are present now.*”

“Get back! You’re burning me. How can I tell you to kill it? You’d kill *me* if you did.”

“It is not so.”

“Why, you’re hurting me now.”

“I never said it wouldn’t hurt you, I said it wouldn’t kill you.”

“Oh, I know. You think I’m a coward. But it isn’t that. Really it isn’t. I say! Let me run back by tonight’s bus and get an opinion from my own doctor. I’ll come again the first moment I can.”

“*This moment contains all moments.*”

“Why are you torturing me? You are jeering at me. How *can* I let you tear me to pieces? If you wanted to help me, why didn’t you kill the damned thing without asking me – before I knew? It would be all over by now if you had.”

“I cannot kill it against your will. It is impossible. Have I your permission?”

The Angel’s hands were almost closed on the Lizard, but not quite. Then the Lizard began chattering to the Ghost so loud that even I could hear what it was saying.

“Be careful,” it said. “He can do what he says. He can kill me. One fatal word from you and he *will!* Then you’ll be without me forever and ever. It’s not natural. How could you live? You’d only be a sort of ghost, not a real man as you are now. He doesn’t understand. It may be natural for him, but it isn’t for us. Yes, yes. I know there are no real pleasures now, only dreams. But aren’t they better than nothing? And I’ll be so good. I admit I’ve sometimes gone too far in the past, but I promise I won’t do it again. I’ll give you nothing but really nice dreams – all sweet and fresh and almost innocent...”

“Have I your permission?” said the Angel to the Ghost.

“I know it will kill me.”

“It won’t. But supposing it did?”

“You’re right. It would be better to be dead than to live with this creature.”

“Then I may?”

“Damn and blast you! Go on, can’t you? Get it over. Do what you like,” bellowed the Ghost: but ended, whimpering, “God help me. God help me.”

Next moment the Ghost gave a scream of agony such as I never heard on Earth. The Burning One closed his crimson grip on the reptile: twisted it, while it bit and writhed, and then flung it, broken backed, on the turf.

“Ow! That’s done for me,” gasped the Ghost, reeling backwards.

For a moment I could make out nothing distinctly. Then I saw, between me and the nearest bush, unmistakably solid but growing every moment solidier, the upper arm and the shoulder of a man. Then, brighter and still stronger, the legs and hands. The neck and golden head materialized while I watched... the actual completing of a man – an immense man, naked, not much smaller than the Angel.

What distracted me was the fact that at the same moment something seemed to be happening to the Lizard. At first I thought the operation had failed. So far from dying, the creature was still struggling and even growing bigger as it struggled. *And as it grew it **changed**.* Its hinder parts grew rounder. The tail, still flickering, became a tail of hair that flickered between huge and

glossy buttocks. Suddenly I started back, rubbing my eyes. What stood before me was the greatest stallion I have ever seen, silvery white but with mane and tail of gold. It was smooth and shining, rippled with swells of flesh and muscle, whinneying and stamping with its hoofs. At each stamp the land shook and the trees dindled.*[trembled]*

The new-made man turned and clapped the new horse's neck. It nosed his bright body. Horse and master breathed each into the other's nostrils. The man turned from it, flung himself at the feet of the Burning One, and embraced them. When he rose I thought his face shone with tears, but it may have been only the liquid love and brightness (one cannot distinguish them in that country) which flowed from him. I had not long to think about it. In joyous haste the young man leaped upon the horse's back. Turning in his seat he waved a farewell, then nudged the stallion with his heels. They were off before I well knew what was happening. There was riding if you like! I came out as quickly as I could from among the bushes to follow them with my eyes; but already they were only like a shooting star far off on the green plain, and soon among the foothills of the mountains. Then, still like a star, I saw them winding up, scaling what seemed impossible steeps, and quicker every moment, till near the dim brow of the landscape, so high that I must strain my neck to see them, they vanished, bright themselves, into the rose-brightness of that everlasting morning.

While I still watched, I noticed that the whole plain and forest were shaking with a sound which in our world would be too large to hear, but there I could take it with joy. I know it was not the Solid People who were singing. It was the voice of that earth, those woods and those waters. A strange archaic, inorganic noise, that came from all directions at once... It sang,

"The Master says to our master, Come up. Share my rest and splendor till all natures that were your enemies become slaves to dance before you..."

"From beyond all place and time, out of the very Place, authority will be given you: the strengths that once opposed you shall be obedient fire in your blood and heavenly thunder in your voice."

"Overcome us that, so overcome, we may be ourselves: we desire the beginning of your reign as we desire dawn and dew, wetness at the birth of light."