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but we boys couldn't understand.

The Giraffe

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The giraffe entered our town in the morning and looked at us all from high above. He had been brought along to attract a crowd by one of those men who set themselves up in the squares to sell razor blades. He was taller than the steeple, seen in perspective, but his eyes seemed close to us just the same, and rosy and good like stars at dawn.

Not only the children fell under a spell watching him, but we boys too; even the men and women at first. He was the most extraordinary thing ever seen in our square. Slowly he would lower his head, then raise it again to a dizzying height. He must have seen over the houses, the clotted red roofs, and the horizon. Who knows how far.

We boys made faces at him from below and shouted dirty words as if he were a girl with a long neck; it was only a way of distinguishing ourselves from the children, who admired him with their mouths wide open, but inside we felt still more excitement than they did. By now we had discovered everything in our world; we knew the alleys, the houses of the town one by one, and the people, the words, the seasons, the days always the same: a reality full of limits that now the giraffe

extended easily. We felt we were in Africa just to see him.

Every minute we had free—Flavio, Agostino, Boddò, the others, and I—there we were in the square, making a circle around him. The peddler said, "Will you come and buy my blades?" But our beards hadn't grown yet enough for us to need them.

All at once we saw the man's face turn red and then white, we saw him fall to the ground and lie there, still. The giraffe swung his head down slowly and kept it low, immobile over him. Soon after that, the doctor arrived and said, "He's dead, just like that."

When they had taken him away, the giraffe raised his head again in the middle of the square. He moved his jaws, and his eyes had suddenly become attentive. The people standing around said, "Poor animal, what will we do with him?"

No one knew, not even the policeman, and it was then that Rolandino jumped out and said, "I'll keep him until someone comes to get him."

What will you do with him, Rolandino, with a giraffe?

Rolandino was a stubby boy, couldn't even reach high enough to touch the giraffe's belly, so of course the people standing there had to laugh; but we boys told him, "We'll help you, or else he'll eat you alive."

Rolandino took him by the halter, and we pushed him from behind, because at first he didn't want to budge. The people asked us, "Where will you take him? What will you do with him?"

What will we do with him, boys, with a giraffe?

At last he moved and from then on gently followed us. It was lovely and new, leading him through our narrow streets. The roofs couldn't imprison that high

head, and it seemed they took on another aspect and we ourselves had another look about us too. It was as if the giraffe were our periscope, to see from up above who knows what, who knows where.

Meanwhile, we studied every spot on his skin, every movement of his delicate muscles, his every expression. By the time we were done, it seemed we had built him with our own hands.

A thing pure and agile amid the stumpy, blackened shapes of the houses; even the girls seemed homely in comparison, standing still at their doors, and you could tell by their eyes how much they would have liked to come along after us. Whereas the old women crossed themselves as if he were a wild beast, our giraffe.

We didn't know what to give him to eat, but he took care of that himself, denuding the trees the mayor had planted in a little square to camouflage it as a public park. A giraffe, certainly, is more important than leaves (anyway the winter would have eaten them), and yet everyone put up a fuss, even to calling the policeman, who came and said, "If you don't take him away, I'll kill him with my revolver."

Then it began to get dark and the eyes of our giraffe gradually grew larger and almost bloody, and we led him close to other people on purpose to give them a fright. Even most of the men, besides the old women, didn't know right then and there whether giraffes are fierce or not.

Rolandino especially was happy when the giraffe—letting his head droop low—made someone go running. It was a kind of revenge for him, so tiny and used to having to run away from everyone else. He felt tall and free, escaped from reality, when he had that absurd, wonderful animal close by, as for that matter all of us did, even though we kept pretending we had taken it up as a game.



The darkness became so thick it swallowed up the giraffe's head, which was taller still than the street lamps; there remained only his gray and slender legs dancing among us over the stones. For a while, we continued wandering through the town, by now deserted. Our town went to bed early nights. We took the giraffe in front of the windows, so that his head looked in from outside. No one had been expecting it, that glance, in the privacy of their homes, and cries of fear or of shame were heard. Who knows what our giraffe had discovered.

When all the shutters had been closed with a bang, a tremor seemed to pass down the animal's long legs. Rolandino said, "He's cold, he's used to the sun of Africa. Where can we find a place for him to sleep?"

There wasn't a house or a stall high enough for him and we didn't know what to do. The cold came from every part of the horizon, squeezing us together into a tight circle. The giraffe's skin was icy as a stone and all at once we seemed to have a monument before us.

A funny giraffe monument pierces slender and long into the sky. What shall we do with him?

Rolandino had an idea and said, "He'd fit in the church."

We felt dismayed for a second, but then one of us said, "I'll go and rob the key from the sexton." Another said, "God will certainly be happy to have him as a guest."

It took some doing to make him lower his head enough—and it wasn't much—to enter the church. Then we had to light a candle or two, and the giraffe looked smaller to us but its shadow immense over the nave. Motionless he remained all night in front of the altar while we dozed here and there among the pews and the confessionals. By morning, however, he had

eaten the roses, the carnations, the lilies, the chrysanthemums, and the candles too.

It was then that the little old women dressed in black arrived for the first Mass and they began to shout, to cry, to pray. The giraffe, frightened, withdrew to the front of the church, placing his head right next to that of Jesus.

The priest arrived from the sacristy and at first buried his hands in his red hair but then we thought we saw him smile, even though he charged us to take that beast immediately out of the House of God.

The town had awakened early that morning; we found the square full of people who were angry with us and our giraffe, the women on account of the profaned church and the men perhaps on account of his glances at them through their windows the night before. But there must have been other reasons too for the people's hatred; like fear of having things change, wanting to keep a way of life that we wanted to alter with our giraffe. So many reasons there must have been, but we boys couldn't understand. We knew only they had grown in a single night, like poisonous mushrooms.

Even the mayor was there and furious because of his lovely little trees, now bare. He said, "We'll have to kill the giraffe." Everyone agreed. If they kill him, boys, shall we start the revolution?

Luckily, Rolandino had another idea. He began to run, all of a sudden, pulling the giraffe behind him. The mayor and the people moved aside. We other boys slipped into the gap he had opened, without giving heed to our mothers and our bosses who were calling us, because it was time to return to everyday life.

Out of the square and beyond the town we ran, behind the sinuous giraffe, to look for hayfields. Soon we were moving in harmony with him, a magical lightness in

our limbs until panting we stopped in a field on the side of a hill and Rolandino said happily, "We've made it."

Among ourselves we pretended it was a game, whereas it wasn't. We set to work pulling hay from the earth with our hands, and the farmers looked at us grimly from the threshing floor; but they didn't have the courage to come out. Who knows whether they're fierce, those giraffes?

Meanwhile we made plans for getting him back in the town, thinking of ways to force him on the mayor and the people. Livio said, "We could build him a house next to the town walls and put a fence around it, make a zoo."

Rolandino said the giraffe had to stay free.

But our talk was useless, and it was slow, for we knew we were defeated. And the giraffe knew it too; we held the hay up but he didn't want any. He kept his head high and immobile on his stiffened neck; his eyes had an opaque, anemic red in them, like the stars when they're on the point of dying out.

Rolandino said, "It's the cold, or maybe those leaves he ate have hurt him somehow." There were tears in his voice.

Our giraffe stood still, his head piercing the sky. We called him in vain, we punched him with sticks and climbed on one another's shoulders to carry the sweet-smelling hay to his mouth, which he didn't open.

Slowly, then, he folded his legs. His neck alone remained erect for an instant, before flowing to the ground with a long, desperate sob. His eyes were at our feet and they were spent, solid, and smooth, like those of marble statues.

Our giraffe had died by himself, boys, there was no need for them to kill him. Darn this town anyway, where giraffes can't live, because there's room only for the things that are already here.

I

PLAIN SENSE

Without Knowing Why

The boys feel differently about the giraffe than the adults in their town do. Logic seems to have little to do with their reactions.

1. What clues can you find that tell you where this incident takes place?
2. How do the boys obtain the giraffe?
3. How do the boys feel about the giraffe?
4. How do the adults feel?

II

IMPLICATIONS

React to the following statements from the story. First, in your own words, explain what the narrator means and then decide whether you agree or disagree with what is said.

1. "A giraffe, certainly, is more important than leaves. . . ."
2. "He felt tall and free, escaped from reality, when he had that absurd, wonderful animal close by, as for that matter all of us did, even though we kept pretending we had taken it up as a game."
3. "God will certainly be happy to have him as a guest."
4. "But there must have been other reasons too for the people's hatred; like fear of having things change, wanting to keep a way of life that we wanted to alter with our giraffe."
5. "Darn this town anyway, where giraffes can't live, because there's room only for the things that are already here."

III

READING LITERATURE

Perceiving Tone

1. Who is telling about the giraffe?
2. How does he feel about the giraffe?

IV

WORDS

By the use of descriptive words the author gradually builds a vivid picture of a giraffe. Here are some of the words used. Look up those you do not know.

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| 1. Immobile | 4. Absurd |
| 2. Agile | 5. Periscope |
| 3. Sinuous | 6. Opaque |