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Opening extract from

The Doldrums

Written by

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The Doldrums
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✦ Great White Nothingness ✦

Out of the thousands of children born every single day, at least one of them will turn out to be a dreamer. And on May the fifth, in room 37E of the maternity ward at Rosewood Hospital, that one child was Archer Benjamin Helmsley. Yes, there was simply no mistaking it. The doctors saw it, the nurses saw it, and much to her chagrin, his mother saw it. Even a pigeon that wandered into the viewing room station saw it.

The young Archer B. Helmsley lay quietly in the maternity ward, staring at the ceiling. He didn't know it was a ceiling. He didn't know what anything was. But Archer lay there all the same, gazing up into that great white nothingness, when all at once, two heads sprouted from nowhere.

"Why hello there," said one of the heads. "You *must* be Archer."

"Yes," agreed the second head. "He truly *must* be Archer."

Whether he must be Archer or not, Archer was Archer, but Archer himself didn't know that yet.

"Do you know who we are?" asked the first head.

"How could he?" said the second. "He's only forty-eight hours old."

The first head agreed. "In that case, I believe introductions are in order. I'm your Grandpa Helmsley and this—*this* is your Grandma Helmsley."

Archer didn't respond because Archer couldn't respond. There's really not much you can do when you're only forty-eight hours old. But the two heads went on and on about this and that, and Archer looked from one to the other, not understanding a single word. Then a third head sprouted from nowhere and just as quickly, all three disappeared, leaving Archer to stare at the ceiling.

• Helmsleys of 375 Willow Street •

Three days later, Archer was released from Rosewood Hospital and carried to a tall, skinny house on a crooked narrow street in a quiet neighborhood of a not-so-quiet city.

Archer was too little to notice that all of the houses on Willow Street were tall and skinny and stacked one next to the other, like a row of tin soldiers. Archer was also too little to know that his house, number 375, was frequently mistaken for a museum. You see, Archer's house belonged to Archer's grandparents, the renowned explorers and naturalists Ralph and Rachel Helmsley.



HELMSLEY HOUSE

375 WILLOW STREET

THE DOLDRUMS

• Wandering & Wondering •

Some parents may wonder, *How do we know we have the right one?* after bringing their child home from the hospital. If Mr. and Mrs. Helmsley had such thoughts of their own, they were quickly extinguished. From the very beginning, Archer showed all the signs of being a Helmsley.


DOLDRUM'S PRESS

THE DOLDRUMS

During his early years, Archer had a fairly perfect life. Fortunately, his fairly perfect life didn't last very long. Why is that fortunate?


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5



GREAT WHITE NOTHINGNESS

We all know perfect boys and perfect girls. They live in perfect houses owned by perfect parents. They dress perfectly and walk perfectly and live their lives in the most perfectly perfect way. It's perfectly terrible. They're perfectly dull. So it's fortunate this story is about no such child.


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CHAPTER ONE



• Helmsley House •

Archer didn't have a dog or cat like many children do, but he did have an ostrich, a badger, and a giraffe. Helmsley House was filled with creatures, on all four floors and in all of the rooms. They lined the narrow staircases and still narrower halls. They were all stuffed with fluff and couldn't do a thing, but that didn't bother Archer. And because he had no brothers or sisters to speak to, Archer spoke to the animals.

"Good morning, badger," Archer said on his way to the kitchen. "How's the weather?"

"I'm sorry to say the rainy autumn continues," the badger replied. "This moisture does a terrible number on the fur. Just look at this poof."

Archer gave the badger a pat on the head.

"I never would have noticed," he lied. (The badger's fur

always looked a frightful mess when the humidity was high.)

Mrs. Helmsley poked her head from the kitchen door.

"Who are you speaking to?" she asked.

"*Oh*—no one," said Archer. "Just myself."

He stepped beneath his mother's frown and into the kitchen.

After eating his breakfast of tea with milk and toast with jam, Archer began exploring. He wandered down the first-floor hallway and into the conservatory, a glass room filled with glass cases that stuck out into the back garden, and pressed his face against one that was filled with bizarre jungle insects.

It's good these are dead, he thought. One, he was certain, would turn his head purple if it latched onto his toe. Another, he assumed, would dig its way under his skin and decide to start a family deep inside. *Very good indeed.*

Along the walls were more glass cases holding row after row of neatly aligned butterflies. Archer noted these were not of the variety one might take an interest in and chase after. On the contrary, it appeared as though these might take an interest in and chase after you.

"Best to avoid these butterflies," he said to the giraffe.

"A wise choice, my dear," the giraffe replied. "I shudder every time I look at them."

"Do you think we should even call them butterflies?" he asked.

"Perhaps a name like *shudderflies* would be more accurate," said the giraffe.

Archer grinned. "Yes. These are definitely shudderflies."

He turned to leave, but nearly hit the ceiling when he discovered his mother standing behind him. Her hands were holding her hips in place.

"Who are you speaking to?" she insisted.

"*Oh*—no one," he replied. "Just myself."

Archer slipped beneath her furrowed brow and continued on his way.

• Glockenspiel & Scuttlebutt •

Archer's mother, Helena E. Helmsley, hosted frequent dinner parties at Helmsley House. The guests of these events were always eager to see the home that belonged to the renowned explorers. Archer, on the other hand, was never excited to see the guests.

"It's going to be a big one tonight," he said, consoling the ostrich with a pat on the back.

"Don't touch me," snapped the ostrich. "I told you not to come near me with those filthy hands."

Archer apologized and slowly backed away. (The ostrich was like that sometimes.)

It's often the case that adults look at children as if they

were nothing more than bizarre museum exhibits. For a boy like Archer, in a house like his, this treatment was worse. Much worse. So on these nights he tried his best, often with little success, to escape upstairs.

"Archer," said Mrs. Helmsley, just as he put his foot on the stair. "I would like to introduce you to Mr. Glockenspiel. He owns an award-winning ballpoint pen factory in Germany."

Archer turned and approached this well-whiskered man.

"Good evening, Mr. Glob of Seal," he said.

Mr. Glockenspiel frowned. Mr. Helmsley tried his best not to laugh. Mrs. Helmsley found the task much simpler.

"It's *Glockenspiel*," she insisted. "Glock—en—spiel."

"That is correct," huffed the Glob of Seal.

Archer was glad this man's name was not Glob of Seal. You wouldn't go very far with a name like that.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Gawk and Squeal," he said.

Mr. Helmsley nearly burst. Mrs. Helmsley grabbed Archer's arm. She ushered him away from the Glob of Seal and assigned him the task of carrying a tray of cucumbers around to the guests.



"Just smile and nod," she said, her hazel eyes looking terribly grave. "There's no need to say another word tonight."