

THE TWO KINGS

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AT MIDDAY, IN A VERY BUSY restaurant, a waitress asked a lean, solitary-looking man if he minded sharing his table. His clothes were cheap and his face showed obvious anxiety. But because there was no place to put the new customer, she waited for his reply.

“No,” he whispered, even though he preferred to be alone. He watched the waitress make her way to the front door. Using her whole arm, she pointed to the portion of the table that he was not using. The lean man looked down at his plate and busily worked with his knife and fork. He wanted to limit the interaction she was imposing on him.

The restaurant was warm and smelled nicely from all of the food and there was a murmur from the conversations.

The lean man, Albert, glanced up again and moved his feet. The other man, who had crossed the restaurant to sit with him, had trouble extricating the chair from the tricky little table. The chair rattled. The fat man eventually sat down, but did not know what to do with the wrapped flowers that he held. There was no space on their already cramped table, so he looked to the floor, but he did not want to risk them getting trampled, so he laid them across his lap. The fat man smiled, raised his eyebrows and cried out, “So much rain today!”

“Yes,” the lean man mumbled, with food in his cheek. He was offended by the fat man’s comfort at this table that was rightly his. He felt that his lunchtime silence was in peril, and that the newcomer showed poor manners by joining this table and taking over the mood of it.

“Where should we put it?” the fat man asked.

The thin man glanced up in confusion.

“This rain? Where can it go?”

Albert remained uncomfortable and silent, hopeful the large man would stop drawing so much attention and leave him in some peace.

“Well? Where should we put it?”

“I don’t understand!”

“The rain! Where should we put the rain?”

The fat man reached across the table and held the thin man’s elbow. The thin man flushed from the touch. He felt as though everyone must be staring, smirking. “It goes down the street,” the thin man said coarsely, without looking up from his plate.

“And then?”

“And then what? Into the sewers, into the rivers, into the ocean.”

The man with the flowers sighed with exaggeration. “So we’re safe then.” He patted the lean man’s shoulder. “We are secure. That is most important. To be secure. First have security. Then, second, have abundance. I am Sasha.”

Albert stared at Sasha’s hand. He had no desire to shake the fat man’s hand. Sasha glowed. His smile was radiant, his face was round and lively, and like Albert, he was also enduring the loss of his dark hair.

“And your name?”

“Albert.”

“Albert!” Sasha beamed. “Like a king!”

“Yes,” the thin man whispered.

“Sasha is like a king too! So what they have done is put both the kings together here! What do you do?”

“Nothing,” said Albert, his hand knocking over an empty glass, then scrambling to catch it. “There is no work for a good man.”

Sasha stared at him, nodded, then looked around the restaurant. This was his favourite part of the meal. He savoured the anticipation and choice and the pleasure the meal would bring. “What are you eating?”

“The special. Fish and potatoes.”

The waitress set a glass of water on the table and with a gesture of her hand let them know that she would come back.

“I always get the special,” Albert said with pride. “You know that it is fresh.”

“Dogma.”

“What?”

“Dogma! That’s absolute dogma. In the market, is the discounted meat the freshest?”

“What?”

“Or the discounted bread? No, this is not economics. You’re a bad king. Always avoid discounts. They’re devilish.”

Sasha squinted at the menu and, as the waitress passed by, pointed at his order. Whenever the restaurant door opened, the sound of the rain filled the packed dining hall.

Ceiling fans spun above them.

The waitress returned from the counter with Albert's bill and took the plate that held his knife and fork and napkin. He got his wallet out, then stopped.

"This isn't my bill. I—"

"He had the special," Sasha interrupted, leaning back and looking without much interest at another table. "Even I know that. With a glass of water. With many pieces of square ice. Charge him for ice."

The waitress apologized. She went to the counter and stood there, trying to remember whose bill she could be holding. She gazed at the crowd, hoping that one of the faces would help her memory.

Sasha laid the thick, mixed bouquet across the table.

"Who are these for?" Albert asked, giving in to curiosity. He was still holding his wallet.

"My girlfriend. But I am early. She isn't home yet."

"Your girlfriend? You're not married?"

"No," he said. "I was married once, but in a philosophical way. Now I have three girlfriends and I am filled with joy."

"Three girlfriends?"

"Yes. There is Anna who is slender and bleak and holds no illusions—which comforts me when I get too questing with philosophical enquiries. Eva is devout and nearly starves herself out of worry for others, and Helena is a social butterfly from the heavens. Can I tell you something, Albert? I used to be grave like you and always imploring 'God help me, let me see the humour in this, let me see the good in that, give me this, give me that'—"

"And now?"

"Now, I am brimming. I wake up in the mornings with such excitement. I bring gifts without occasion and I feel that life is packed with love and surprises. Now I am troubled by a different heaviness." Sasha handled his generous stomach with both hands and smiled.

"How long has this been going on? This ... arrangement that you have."

"Three months."

"Three months. Okay," Albert said with relief.

"What?"

The waitress left the right bill between the two men.

“Three months is nothing. It can’t work that way. And have you considered what you’re doing to these women? It will come apart. And then what will you have? You’ll be alone with nothing. And you’ll have destroyed three lives.”

“Why should it come apart?”

“It can’t work that way,” Albert said with indignation. He shook his head.

“Dogma,” Sasha said, and with a gesture of both his hands, he brushed the lean man off.

“Dogma, yes, dogma. Everything’s dogma to you, isn’t it?”

They talked further, with intensity at that little table, as if they were rival dogs, and, after debating love, the proper conduct for a man and even the natural tendencies of the heart, they had each alienated the other.

Albert went through his wallet and left some money with his bill. He stood up, struggled into his drab coat and, with his chin high, went outside into the rain. He flipped his collar up and made his way through the dark and windy streets. “Miserable,” he said to himself. “It’s just miserable today.”

With head down and hands deep in his pockets, and the rain falling over the city, Albert bumped into people and pushed by them without a word. The rain rushed down hills and roofs. Lightning yellowed the sky. With his hair dripping and his back hunched, he walked. He had no need to look up or see where he was going. He chewed over his mealtime conversation for the duration of his walk, repeating it to himself, and he also thought of the state of his own threadbare life. He thought it over philosophically, abstractedly, religiously, in the terms that mattered the most to him. Could a life be both dreary and noble, he wondered with grief. For him, dignity was paramount. It was more important than happiness, pleasure and even prestige. Stopped at a corner, lodged deep in a crowd and unable to cross, Albert retreated under an awning and leaned his head against a shop window. He shut his eyes and listened to the rain coursing past him. When the crowd moved, he joined them and walked too. He compared himself to Sasha and evaluated his own life against the fat man’s. How is it, he wondered, climbing a hill with long strides, a man can carry himself without any dignity at all? Haven’t I been brave? Despite all that’s happened, I still manage it. So how is life just?

In the restaurant, the fat man pushed the flowers to the other side of the table, where Albert's elbows and dish had been. Sasha smiled as the waitress set down the bowl of thick, slow-cooked stew. She handed him cutlery rolled tightly in a napkin, and a basket of bread. Sasha tore a piece of bread and dipped it into the stew and swallowed. He tore a second piece of bread and ate the stew this way, sponging at it with the bread until the roll was finished, then he spooned up the rest of it. He felt warm, healthy and satisfied.

The waitress walked by his table. With her hand on the table, she looked at Sasha and asked him about his flowers.

"For a friend," he replied.

She nodded. "They're beautiful." She did not smile when she said this. She picked up the bouquet and smelled it, her eyes open. She set the flowers on the table and looked around the restaurant with a wistful expression that suggested to him that she was undergoing some indecision. She stood with one hand on the table and the other on her hip.

Even though he had not finished, Sasha checked the time, touched her hand, waking her from her daydream, and kindly asked if she would bring his bill. He left the money and, shielding the flowers from the rain, hurried across the street and pulled open the apartment door. With one hand on the railing, he spiralled up three flights of stairs, knocked and waited in front of her door while breathing heavily. "My beautiful," he cried, flinging his arms out wide when the door opened.

In front of his small house, the thin man pulled his keys from his pocket. He faltered before finding the correct one. He slid it into the lock and slowly creaked open the door. His wife came in from the other room and watched him while he stood with his arms out dripping. Their home was unlit and cluttered and cold.

"What are you looking at? I'm soaked through. Make me some tea."

Albert hung up his coat. He took his shoes off and his wet, clinging socks and sat down in an unravelling armchair by the front window. He sat in this chair, with the armrests that his hands had worn down to their wooden bones. Night after night, without book or newspaper to accompany him, he sat thinking while facing the tall window. The only subject his mind needed were the events of his day. He was absorbed by this thorough reckoning. It

was a refuge for him, separate, more clear than the arbitrary and unfair city outside. He thought about what he had done and said, and his prevailing attitude. He sat in silence while he made his judgements. He was addicted to this routine. He pulled the blanket from behind him and spread it over his rain-soaked lap. His bony feet were one on top of the other, trying to get warm.

Agatha stared at him.

“Well? Where is the tea? You’ve seen that I’m wet, and that I must be cold.”

Agatha turned the light on. She had the peculiar habit of standing with her hand against the wall, surveying the brightened room, acclimating herself to it, as if these rooms she had lived in for many years would be somehow foreign to her. Albert always watched this with irritation.

She was plump, she wore an apron, and standing in the kitchen doorway, she used her wrist to brush aside her hair. She saw him, but not one muscle in her face shifted. Even her, Albert thought to himself. I must think well of her. He tried to will affection. He felt tall and stony. How, he wondered, had this happened?

“Come,” he said nicely, with a richer voice than was usual for him. He waved Agatha over.

“Are you okay? You seem ... hurt.”

He softened and yielded himself to her. “I was just told—I had an argument with some stranger and I was denounced. I was told that I was incapable of true love, of elevating love. That life,” he sighed, “was wasted on me.”

They stared at each other.

“And then this man reached over the table with both hands, grabbed the air beside my ears and said, ‘I snatch your soul and afterlife away.’ And he pretended to eat and chew and swallow them. My soul and afterlife. And then he rubbed his big belly with pride.”

She wore a pink-and-green dress with a floral print. Plastic buttons went down the back. It hung to her knees. She stood silently, impassively, like a tall stone, conveying no feeling.

“Oh, I don’t need you to tell me yes or no—I know what’s true! Come, sit with me.”

The thin man waved her over, but there was nowhere for her to sit. She approached him gingerly. Because his arms were out, she sat dumbly in his lap. She felt strange. She felt old and she was much heavier than him. It was not comfortable to be sitting on him.

“I know my soul is mine,” he said. “And I know what elevation I’m capable of.”

“Where did you meet him?”

“At lunch,” he confessed.

“Did you spend all of the day’s money?”

“Yes.”

“You’re a selfish man,” she said while he stroked her hair.

He did not even hear her reprimand. Albert leaned his head against her large arm. His hand came down from her neck to her back. “I don’t like others at all,” he whispered into the cloth of her dress. He had repressed this feeling for so long. He had hoped that by not saying it, he could banish it from within him. She lifted his head from her and got up from his lap.

“Did you hear me?” she said, bringing her fist down on his shoulder. “You’re a selfish man!”

Agatha pushed her sewing table roughly across the floor, past a shelf of books that neither of them read. When the sewing table caught up on a rug she kicked at it, muttering to herself, then pushed the table towards the wall, dragging the stubborn rug across the floor with her. She narrated her life to herself—its somewhat promising beginning and then flattening trajectory—and castigated him and their long, durable marriage. “And so?” she said from the far corner. “What are you muttering to yourself? What is it you’re saying? I know it isn’t an apology. I know it isn’t, ‘Sorry for spending our money on myself.’ ‘Sorry for not finding a job.’ ‘Sorry for not being useful.’ ‘Sorry for being so peculiar.’”

The thin man sat in the armchair. The rain poured. He squeezed the armrests tightly while she spoke.

On his throne, the thin man felt as if he was arriving at something poignant, something unusual and deeply profound, some intellectual pinnacle, and with his bare feet rubbing together for some warmth and his hands gripping the armrests, he stared through the windowpane into the dark afternoon while he waited for wisdom.

“Well? Speak up if you’re going to speak—otherwise keep it all to yourself,” Agatha taunted. “Lock it up. Don’t sit mumbling as if something worthwhile may fall from your mouth.”

“I mustn’t think badly of him,” Albert was muttering to himself, thinking of the fat man and clutching the wooden skeleton of the arm chair. “He’s just a sensualist. I mustn’t think badly of anyone. It’s a sin to think badly.

One's suffering must be borne with grace, with dignity. One must bear one's burden. One must generate charitable feelings."

Agatha kicked at the rug. Her feet fought with it. She stomped and argued loudly with the rug. Then she lifted her chin again. "Lock it up or say it. No use muttering to yourself. No use at all. No use letting another day slip by. No use being so peculiar. No use thinking all the time and giving nothing to anyone else. No use to your misery. No use to your loneliness. No use to that family pride of yours. No use to your father and his insignificant little country church and his instructions. Go on. Forsake me. Forsake the world. Forsake sweets and going out. Forsake all of the things we could get if you went out and worked. Forsake every day. Forsake every—"

"But it takes such vigilance to be good!" he cried, breaking off the armrest with the violence of this discovery. His hand flung up and the piece went flying. How easily, he thought, it would be to be good if one were happy.