

WORDS + IMAGES



KINGDOM

Are you a bad man? she asked.
 I don't know.
 You say one thing, then you say another.
 I have a lot to think about.

We stood on the patio. Birds were fussing in the yard.
 I threw the thing in my hand at them. They scattered.

What was that? she asked.
 I don't know.
 The birds didn't do anything.
 I didn't say they did.
 You don't say anything.

I got lost on the way to work that morning. And it was a small town. Everyone sat around thinking about what everyone else was doing. I'd been dreaming about castles. Heidelberg, Luxembourg. What would it be like to wake up in medieval times? Cold, probably. Dangerous. You had to walk a fine line back then.

I stopped at a Burger King near the highway. I'd seen a T.V. ad for a new breakfast sandwich. It was a good ad. It seemed exciting the sandwiches were finally here. Every cashier had a picture of the thing on her hat. I ordered the full breakfast meal. When it arrived, the cashier handed me a paper crown with a picture of the sandwich on it.

Is this free? I asked.
 It's a promotion, she said.
 Shouldn't we place it on my head?
 Do what you want with it.
 I guess it'd be disrespectful to refuse.

I picked up the crown, inspected the gold tines.

I need to speak to the king about this, I finally said.
 He's out back.
 Where?
 Behind the carwash.

* * *

I took my meal behind the building. It was a peaceful morning, bright sun in the east, sweeping spring air, three goofy clouds scudding in from the north. The sandwich wasn't any good. It tasted like fish. I threw half of it in a green dumpster and kept on across the lot. Behind the carwash was a bright yellow trailer. I knocked on the door and a bearded man in a robe answered.

Are you the king? I asked.
 Who's asking?
 I just bought the new breakfast sandwich at your store.
 Tasted like fish.
 Not my store.
 I was given a crown.
 For free?
 It came with the sandwich.
 Good deal, he said.
 You don't know anything about it?
 Not yet.
 Sorry to have bothered you.
 Doesn't mean I'm not the king.

He invited me in and poured coffee for two. We sat in the living room and he showed me pictures from all over the world. Belgium, Dakar, Gainesville. He'd flown reconnaissance jets for the Air Force and had friends on three continents. He said one was a Saudi prince he met during Desert Storm.

Taught him how to fly, he said.

Jets?

Apache.

In the war?

I'm not sure what you'd call what we were doing over there.

There was a stack of travel magazines on the kitchen table. A Snap-On Tools calendar over the sink. Postcard of a pyramid taped to the fridge.

What exactly are you king of? I asked.

This. And the carwash.

You own it?

It was given to me, he said.

You have a throne?

Second door on your left.

The king turned on a radio in the kitchen and explained the intricacies of his empire. Big incentives, low wages, high turnover. The key to a successful monarchy, he said: keep the little ones busy.

What about marriage? I asked.

That's harder.

Why?

There's a contract.

So it's inflexible.

Ineffective, he said.

How so?

People don't like to be told how to feel.

Give an example.

Communism.

The king gave me a token for a free wash and I drove on to the office. Everything seemed very far away that day. Like I had to unfold a forty-foot arm to reach my coffee. Or grow an ear the size of Illinois to hear the phone.

When I got home that night, everyone was gone. Wife, cat,

dog. The birds on the patio were acting like they owned the place. I threw a frying pan at them and they flitted into an elm tree. A few minutes later they came back.

I made a drink and sat on the couch. The coffee table was covered with women's magazines. Empty boxes sat on the floor. One was enormous. I didn't know they made things that big. You could have parked a car in it. Fit half the town in it.

* * *

When I woke, it was dark. The house was cold, quiet. I went into the bathroom and looked at some old things. Pictures, hairbrushes, towels. I made another drink, sat on a stool in the kitchen, warmed up a pizza, tried to watch T.V. Then I got in the car and drove to town.

Back so soon? the king asked.

I've lost something.

I know.

How?

I don't get a lot of visitors.

He made me a cup of tea and I sat on the couch. Then he put two T.V. dinners in the oven.

I thought about driving the car through the kitchen the other night, I said.

Renovation?

Revelation.

Of what?

Over-stability.

It's in the contract, the king said.

I might need a lawyer.

That's the last thing you need.

I need to get out, I said.

Where?

Anywhere.
 Take my advice.
 What's that? I asked.
 Keep your horse in the stable until you know where
 you're headed.
 That's it?
 That and don't think every little thing means
 something.

The king walked to the window and pulled back the
 curtain. He peered into the parking lot and dimmed
 the lights.

People want what they want, he said.
 I want freedom.
 And it's never the same thing.
 Or maybe a hobby.
 So you have to make a choice.
 Or a vacation, I said.
 Fight or flight.
 Ireland.
 And don't be afraid to execute either one.
 Old Romania.
 I want to show you something.

I saw the king was older than I first thought, with bushy
 eyebrows and liver spots on his cheeks. He had a slight limp
 too. He hobbled to the last room in the trailer. He'd installed
 a massive picture window in the end wall. It was curved and
 looked out on the carwash and the Burger King. There was a
 La-Z-Boy in the middle of the room, gun racks on the wall, a
 British WWII helmet hanging from a pair of deer antlers. He
 gestured for me to sit, then handed me a small, wooden box.

What do you do in here? I asked.
 Keep an eye on things.
 What's in the box?
 It might help.

I opened it and found two Chinese medicine balls. They were
 stainless steel and chimed when I moved them in my hand.
 Each ball had the name of a hotel printed
 on it.

Where'd you get these? I asked.
 Vegas.
 What are they for?
 Not roulette.
 How do they work?
 Roll them around in your hand.
 I am.
 Keep doing it.
 How long?
 Not sure.

He left to check on the food and I read the instructions
 on the box. I rotated the balls in my hand like they said.
 They tinkled and clicked. The sound was soothing. Things
 became clear for a minute. I realized that at least some of
 my unhappiness had increased substantially after a recent
 vacation. Mexico, sunburn, too much vodka. Then
 unreasonable openness, resentment and an insincere
 phone conversation.

The king brought dinner and set it on two T.V. trays. He
 sat in a folding chair and told me about the war while we
 ate—friendly fire, double agents, too much cumin. Before
 he went to bed he said I should stay in the chair until I knew
 what to do.

What should I think about? I asked.
 Camelot.
 What?
 Arthur, Guinevere.
 How will that help?
 They faced a similar problem.
 How will I know when to stop?
 They'll tell you.

He left and I rotated the balls and tried to stay awake. I could see most of Main Street through the big window. The carwash and Burger King closed and the little ones drove off. A red light blinked in the wash bay. I dozed off.

When I woke I was lying in a wide meadow. I could hear shouting in the distance. A massive castle stood on a hill and some kind of contest or sporting event was taking place nearby.

Are you nervous? asked a beautiful woman standing over me.
Yes, of course, I answered.

The air was sweet and warm. Tall grass blew around our ankles. The woman was wearing a wimple and had pale blue eyes and fair skin. She. She looked toward a large tent where a crowd had gathered to watch the contest.

What are they doing? I asked.
It's the tournament.
Should we watch?
We have a lot to do.
Like what?
You're holding court today.

I swallowed hard, straightened my tunic and checked to see if my shoes were polished.

You look fine, she said.
I don't feel fine.
Everyone is looking forward to it.

She took my hand and we walked slowly up the hill. Cheers erupted from the tent as we went by, but I couldn't see what was happening on the other side. At the outer parapet, guards lowered a small bridge over a moat and we crossed into the castle grounds.

Here's Aldfrid, the woman whispered.

A man wearing a fur coat approached.

Sire, he said, dropping to one knee.
Rise, I said in a voice not my own.

I noticed an enormous gold ring on my finger and held it out for Aldfrid to kiss. Then we sat in a pair of sling-back chairs by a fire.

The council is at your service, my liege, Aldfrid said.

Is that why I'm here?

You tell me.

I'm sitting in a chair, I said, smiling.

As am I.

So you can help me?

That's up to the council.

I'm not a real king, you know.

Then why did I kiss your ring?

Maybe you've always wanted to, I said, and we both laughed.

He's traveled a long way to reach us, said the woman in the wimple.

What does that mean? Aldfrid asked.

I'd better get going, I said. But what was I supposed to be looking for?

That's what we've been debating, the woman answered.

* * *

The sun glared through the picture window. I got out of the La-Z-Boy with an aching back, shaded my eyes and stumbled through the trailer. The king wasn't there. I scribbled him a note with my number. Then I started home.

I wasn't ready to go back yet. I didn't feel like myself. I kept driving and after a half hour saw another Burger King off the highway. There was only one cashier on duty. He was playing with a Game Boy and chewing on a french-fry. He eyed me for a second, then went back to his game. I approached the register and ordered the sandwich.

The boy rolled his eyes, put his game down, walked to the kitchen and stuck something in the microwave.

Two-fifty, he said.

I handed him three dollars. The boy looked me over again.

You seem familiar, he said.

I play a familiar person on T.V.

You live in Ellington.

I moved.

I've seen you at the Y.

I teach martial arts.

There's a Burger King in Ellington, why didn't you go there?

It exploded.

When?

Last night.

I didn't hear anything about it.

It burned quickly.

The boy glanced at my car and walked to the microwave. He put the sandwich in it, held out the bag, then withdrew it.

Are you in the Secret Service? he asked.

Yes.

Is this for the President?

I can't say.

Am I making a sandwich for the leader of the free world?

Some would contest that.

I hear he likes French fries.

In certain political climates.

Can I take a picture?

Sure.

The boy handed me the sandwich and jumped over the counter. He pulled a small camera from his pocket, held it out and snapped a picture of the two of us. Then he opened the door, looked both ways, and signaled for me to come out.

Be careful, he said.

Always.

I walked to a park across the street to eat the sandwich. This one didn't have the fish taste. I threw the wrapper in a trashcan and sat on a bench next to a young girl. Her dog walked around in front of us sniffing and peeing on every tree in the park.

You going to school today? I asked.

Every day.

What are you studying?

Shaken-spear.

You like him?

I like the princesses.

What about everything else?

What else is there?

The battles?

No.

Kings?

Booooooring.

Why?

They talk too much.

Doesn't everyone?

Just the kings, she said.

About what?

Ruining everything.

The kings run everything.

Roo-in.

You think so?

I know so.

Why do you like the princesses?

They're beautiful.

They ruin things too.

Only by accident.

They talk.

No.

How can someone be in a play and not talk?

By being a princess.

Which means?

They don't have to.

The dog trotted over and sat at the girl's feet. She stood and waved and they walked away down the middle of the street. She picked up a stick and held it in the air. Every few steps the dog jumped for it and the girl lifted it out of reach. Then she let him have it and he trotted off in front of her.