

Porter Fox 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 fussed 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 everyone else. I'd been thinking about castles. Heidelberg, Luxembourg. What would it be like to live 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 an ad for a new breakfast sandwich. It was a good ad. It seemed *exciting* the sandwiches were finally here. I ordered a breakfast value 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 and inspected the gold tines.
I need to speak to the king about this, I said.
He's out back.
Where?
Behind the carwash.

I took my sandwich behind the building. It was a quiet morning, big 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 it in a 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.

The king turned on a radio in the kitchen and explained the intricacies of his monarchy. Big incentives, low wages, high turnover. The key to a successful reign, 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 continued to the office. Everything seemed far away that day. Like I had to unfold a forty-foot arm to reach my coffee. Or grow an ear the size of Iowa to hear the phone.

When I got home that night, everyone was gone. Wife, cat, dog. The birds on the patio acted 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 fixed 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.

It was dark when I woke. The house was cold and 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 and tried to watch TV. Then I got into the car.

Back so soon? the king asked.
I've lost something.
I know.
How?

I don't get a lot of visitors.

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

I thought about driving the car through the kitchen the other night, I said.
Renovation?
Revelation.
What was revealed?
Over-stability.
It's in the contract, the king said.
I might need a lawyer.
That's the last thing you need. Take my advice.
What's that?
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.

A vacation, I said.

Fight or flight.

Ireland.

And don't be afraid of either.

Old Romania.

I want to show you something.

The king 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's the window for? I asked.

Keep an eye on things.

What's in the box?

It might help.

I opened it and saw two Chinese medicine balls. They were stainless steel and chimed when I moved them in my hand. The name of a hotel was printed on each.

Where'd you get these? I asked.

Vegas.

What are they for?

Not luck.

How do they work?

Roll them around in your hand.

I am.

Keep doing it.

For 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. Key Largo, sunburn, too much vodka. Followed by unreasonable openness, resentment and an insincere phone conversation.

The king brought dinner and set it on two TV trays. He sat in a folding chair and told me about the war while we ate—friendly fire, double agents, spicy food. Before he went to bed he told me to 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 home. A red light blinked in the wash bay and I dozed off.

When I woke I was lying in a wide meadow. I could hear shouting in the distance. There was a castle on a hill and some kind of contest nearby.

Are you nervous? asked a beautiful woman standing over me.

Yes, of course, I answered, getting to my feet.

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

What are they doing? I asked.

It's the tournament.

Shall 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. At the outer parapet of the castle, guards lowered a small bridge over a moat. We crossed it and went through a wooden gate into the courtyard.

Here's Aldfrid, the woman whispered.

A man in a fur cloak 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 were sitting in sling-back chairs by a fire.

The council is waiting, 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 be going, I said. What am I supposed to be looking for again?

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

It was still early and the Burger King and carwash were closed. I wasn't ready to go home yet. I drove through two towns until I found a little park. Then I pulled over and walked to a bench overlooking a long meadow and a pond. It was quiet and peaceful. A few geese swam in circles and a little girl walked her dog. She came over and sat on the bench next to me. Her dog lay beside her and sniffed a candy wrapper on the ground.

I've never seen you here, she said.

I've never been here.

Where are you from?

Ellington, I said.

Is it close to here?

Very close.

How do you get there?

That way, I pointed.

Are you a doctor?

No.

Most people around here are doctors, she said.

The dog nuzzled the girl's leg and she pulled out a bag of treats. The dog snatched one from her hand and she put the bag back in her pocket.

Are 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.

Boooring.

Why?

They talk too much.

Doesn't everyone?

Just the kings, she said.

About what?

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 so I scribbled him a note with my number and left.

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 got up and nudged the girl. She stood and waved and walked away down the middle of the street. A few blocks away she picked up a stick and held it in the air. Every couple of 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.