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Le Roi, laissez-le dormir

VICTOR WASSERMAN

One day in winter the King Of All Things awoke to find that he had died. But this was a simpler time and aside from that one peculiarity everything in his room seemed to be in order. His bed was quite larger than anything you've seen before and he was in no condition to get out of it all by himself this morning; not after the night he had had. So many dreams had left him restless and he had been dehydrated after he had drained his glass of warm milk so early in the night. And so he lay like a dead man in his bed for some time.

When he felt that his strength had come back to him he rang his bell and his butler came in. "Django," he said, "it seems I've died and can't get up." Django responded with a very proper sigh and told the King Of All Things that he was very sorry to hear that and that he had his deepest sympathies. The King responded that he already knew he had them, but the gesture was appreciated.

Together they managed to move the King Of All Things several feet by pulling at his legs, and then at his arms, and then back at his feet until he had slid some distance. His sheets became ruffled because of this but the King did not mind, because he had many more and could replace them. After a little under an hour of this work Django informed the King Of All Things that he had reached the end of his bed and could step down onto his rug now.

The King thanked his butler as he stood up and told him to make a note that in the future the King Of All Things would like a smaller bed until his condition improves. Django removed a note pad from inside his tuxedo pocket and scribbled "KOAT bed: smaller," and then bowed and turned to leave. When he reached the King's door he stopped and turned again. "Would you like me to get your clothes, Sir?"

"No, Django, I don't need all of them today. Just my robe, please." Django fetched it from the King's desk chair and brought it to the King's bedside table, and then left, closing the King's door behind him. Now the King Of All Things was not a heavy man in his lifetime but he was not feeling limber this morning. While still sitting on his bed he performed some stretches and bends until his legs and back felt like they could survive the strain of standing while he put on his robe.

His robe was a wonderful piece of fabric skillfully woven and had thus earned the right to be called specifically "his robe." He had many more, for he was the King Of All Things, but only this one was kept at the ready and inscribed KOAT over his breast pocket. This was true of his favorite desk set and all of his pens, ink bottles, letterheads and his desk itself had a plaque. As was true of his shoes, rugs, bedside table, lamp, bureau, curtains, and door and, until this morning, his bed. Now his bed would be sent to his son's room until it learned to behave itself.

The King Of All Things was, among many things, the King of Modesty, and he would be the first to tell you he wasn't the brightest man on earth. Well, not the first, but if you asked him about what someone else had said, he would have confirmed it, and added, "but I'm his King." He was also the King of Pride, you understand. But as such, the King Of All Things sometimes failed to understand the more delicate things in life, such as the act of departing. Never had the King departed in his life. Wherever he was to go, everything came with him, and as such, he rarely saw the benefit in going out of town (though he greatly enjoyed arriving).

Nevertheless, the King would not be hindered by his own demise and set about the course of his day with this goal in his mind. He placed on his slippers and walked to his great golden doors at the end of his room, knocked lightly, and waited for his butler to open them. They swung open presently and he proceeded down his enormous hallway designed to accommodate elephants (because he had those kinds of things in his house every so often) with Django walking diligently behind him.

"Will you be operating today, given your condition, Sir?"

"Yes, Django, but I'd like it if you'd have Martin come and have a look at me."

"Yes Sir, should I give you the run-down?" The King Of All Things informed Django that he already owned "the run-down," but that he would like to hear it. "You're quite right, Sir," he said and they continued down the hallway to some pace.

His first order of business was to inform his wife of his passing. It would give her something to do and she could plan for his funeral, and his wake would help her to narrow down what she should wear that morning, and all those things would make her happy, he felt. In time the King Of All Things arrived at the King's room in which the Queen Of All Things slept.

Before entering the Queen's room, it should be noted that she was very special, and so her living space reflected this, at times to drastic extents. Unlike the King Of All Things, the Queen Of All Things had not been born into a family that owned everything. She had, of course, come from a degree of royalty, (I say "degree" because, compared to the King Of All Things and his relatives, even the collective royal majesty of Spain, Britain, Belgium, Portugal and several Baltic nations amounted altogether to no more than a humped-back whale orbiting the comparative magnitude of a celestial body) but when she moved in with the King just after their honeymoon (somewhere around the East Wing of the palace) all her belongings had barely filled the trunk at the foot of her bed and so her mother-in-law had made a wedding gift of a wardrobe that was so immense, the Queen entertained fantasies that the people outside the palace must be naked. This had imparted to her a frantic nervousness about making choices such as what to wear because of the seemingly limitless available options and she would often become completely paralyzed when asked to make mundane decisions as a result.

Now the Queen Of All Things had a very large bed, far larger than even the King Of All Things, and the finely carved wooden headboard, which read QOAT on it, had been a far larger undertaking than the carver had been aware of at the time. The spacing



of the letters so as to make them even, as well as the inconsistency of dimensions across the headboard, had caused numerous delays.

The consistency problem stemmed from the lack of a single piece of wood long enough to form the headboard and so several planks had been chosen on the merit of being the best of each supplier's stock, which contributed to the lack of uniformity. The King maintained that though a tree of such dimensions was not available, he was still the King of it and ignored the rest of what was just mentioned on the grounds that it undermined his authority, of which he was the King, and therefore an act of treason. The carpenter had not been hired back. (On an unrelated note, firewood has been scarce of late).

The rest of the Queen's abode had been structured around the bed, in much the same way as a bank is around a vault. The room in which the Queen Of All Things slept had been designed just like Versailles and, in fact, Versailles is a scale model of her room (the French royal family had been disappointed to find that there was no body of water large enough to feed the QOAT fountains and had opted for the diminished size rather than waste the metal piping. The underground French resistance was made possible because of this decision). The enormity of the room provided a special problem for the Queen Of All Things.

You see, the Queen Of All Things was the first woman to marry a King of All Things and weigh less than her husband. Prior to this precedent, the traditional wing for the Queen had seemed quite quaint. But the Queen had grown tiny since her marriage. Now it was a very empty and sparse place and the decorator had been forced to spread out the furniture in an attempt to fill every corner of her room. As a result, the Queen had to powder her nose at one end of the room, and then go up three flights of stairs and across the room to check if she had been consistent all over. All of this contributed to a general lack of excitement in the Queen's life because she could not typically muster enough interest in any task to perform it. The King Of All Things attributed this to why his wife was smaller than the traditional queen; her maid placed the blame on the presence of her private kitchen in the Mirror Room. (Bulimia Nervosa was discovered around this time as well, though I believe it was unrelated.)

As the King Of All Things came through his QOAT doors, his Queen's maid was still trying to explain that his Queen did not usually rise for another half hour. The commotion awoke the Queen and put an end to the argument the King Of All Things and her maid were having.

"I tell you, stop giving me reasons, I already have them."

"What's all this noise, Britty?" The Queen Of All Things asked sleepily.

"Good morning, my Queen. I'm afraid I have some bad news." The King Of All Things sat down on the side of his Queen's bed, looked across the expanse at her, then back at where he was sitting. "Could you scoot down here a bit, honey?" he asked.

The Queen Of All Things looked across the expanse at him. "No," she said sleepily, loud enough for him to hear. These were simpler times.

"My dear, last night I died," said the King Of All Things, playing bashfully with his KOAT embroidery.

"Oh Britty! I'm so sorry," she said, wiping the sleep from her eyes. The King agreed it was sad, but assured her he already had her pity. "Yes, that's very true. Will you go see Martin this morning?"

"He's my next appointment." The Queen Of All Things said that was good and sent the King Of All Things on his way, closing the QOAT doors behind him.

"Doris? Would you bring me just the black clothes today." As the King had thought, it would be easier for the Queen Of All Things to get up the extraordinary energy necessary to do the tasks of her day with the preparations for her husband's funeral underway. The Queen Of All Things had never really adapted well to the sheer enormity of her closet and wardrobe therein, nor any of her tasks. When she had moved in after their marriage, she had packed all of her favorite clothes, but they had all since been forgotten amongst the mountains of fabric. She thought one time she saw one of her original socks, but wasn't sure.

"Oh!" She exclaimed, looking over at the headboard while Doris did her hair, "the tombstone is going to be simply massive!"

I should explain. The King Of All Things was a compulsive man; hence, why he up and died one night. Particularly, he was a compulsive winner, and felt that as the King Of All Things, he should be the best at all things. Unfortunately, he was not physically or mentally equipped to do this. As a result, he was often a trendsetter: inventing new ways of being the best, or new things to be the best at. Combined with his general compulsiveness, this led to his strange desire to have the longest name in the world.

He had been born Abraham, or maybe Kato (this was before birth certificates), but over time he added more names, sometimes at random, sometimes to commemorate special occasions (for his first anniversary he took his wife's maiden name). This persisted for some time until he developed a system: whenever a new child was born and named, he took the name too. He considered this his gift to every newborn and had a form letter sent out informing the parents (he was the King of Generosity too). But as a result, the King Of All Things lost the value of his original name. In response to this, his friends chose to call him Britannica. His wife called him Britty. Everyone else called him stupid. The committee is still out as to what the tombstone will read, though the stonemasons guild has a contingency plan to go on strike.

The King Of All Things was sitting on his throne with Martin, his chancellor, at his right. To Martin's right was Django, who couldn't stop staring at Martin's right hand. Martin's right hand was missing the tips of its fingers and Django had never been able to overcome this, not because he was squeamish (let us remember Django followed the King everywhere and the King was very competitive), but because of how Martin had lost his fingertips.

Martin had been hunting with the King Of All Things and his procession one day, when he had felled a fowl and was

holding the small bird in his hand. A new dog was being used that day and, failing to grasp the concept that the bird could be retrieved without his assistance, the canine had jumped and bitten down with the bird in his mouth, hand and all. In response, the King Of All Things, angry at the disobedience being shown by the dog, took his sword and cut the hound's head off.

He had failed to account however for how far down the dog's throat the bird had been, and removed the tips of Martin's fingers as well. This was a simpler time though, and the King and Martin laughed it off, saying, "You don't have to worry about the world being at your finger tips now, eh? They're six feet deep in world! Aha ha." (The King had the best sense of humor; he made everyone say so.) But Django's unsettled constitution aside, the room was very serious.

"Can you make me better, Martin?" the King Of All Things asked.

"Not really, Sire. After all, you're already the best." (Martin was the only one who was better than the King at wordplay.)

"That is very true, Martin." (The king did not know this.) "But there must be some thing I've overlooked..."

"Do you remember how you died, Sire? Or when in the night?"

"No, I only discovered in the morning when I found I wasn't thirsty anymore."

"What do you mean, my King?" Martin asked with confusion.

"Well, you see, I went to my bed with my warm glass of milk as I do ever night. Don't I, Django?"

"You do, Sir." (He thought he saw Martin trying to tap his fingers and gagged.)

"And I was quite thirsty because, as you recall, it was a hot night." (I refer you to the introduction.)

"Yes," said Martin, "I could scarcely get rid of all my firewood fast enough..."

"Well, once I had drained my glass and nourished my pallet, I was able to sleep some. But I awoke in the night thirsty again."

"Why did you not ring for Django?"

"He did, Chancellor," piped in Django, "but the furnace was so hot the milk boiled off and I could not prepare a glass of suitable warmth."

"Yes, that is a shame," said Martin, "However did you manage that night, Sire?"

"As you can plainly tell, I did not."

"You are absolutely right, it is plain to see that I had forgotten myself entirely after your most unfortunate story, and that the most unfortunate part of it escaped me entirely. Please, accept my apologies."

"I assure you, Martin, I already have them."

"Indeed, Sire." (I refer you to Martin's proficiency.) "And so you awoke to find that you were dead, due to your dehydration in the night?"

"Most certainly! Can you cure this affliction, my most trusted friend?"

"I can promise you, Sire, if I cannot, the grave stone will be on me."

"You've never been more wrong," replied the King.

Martin thought for a long moment, and rubbed his chin diligently as he did so. Django excused himself to vomit. The King Of All Things considered if he should get dressed or have Django procure enough robes to last him for the duration of his rule. (I peeked at the Queen changing.) Then Martin spoke.

"Your highness, you say you do not recall the instant of your death?"

"This is true."

"Nor the means?"

"But we suspect it was the lack of a drink that night," the King Of All Things interjected.

"This is the belief. However, before we have Django arrested for murder (for Django had just returned from the restroom and Martin had noticed the look in the King's eye) we should take another look at this."

"What do you propose, Chancellor?" asked the King.

"Well, how do you feel at this moment? Well?"

"Aside from expired, yes, quite well."

"And how would you say you felt yesterday, prior to your initial thirst? As good?"

"As good as always," said the king.

"So as good as you did when you were alive?" The King Of All Things prided himself on his pleasant disposition and health and said so. "But you do not recall the moment of your death?"

"No, I was asleep."

"Do you recall the moment of your birth then, Sire? Because you most assuredly were wide awake then. I saw it for myself."

"I do not recall that."

"Your birth or my attendance?"

"Neither. Was I a good looking babe?"

"The best." The King clapped. Django felt an invisible noose around his neck. "So you recall neither your birth nor your



death, yet you are quite certain that both occurred?"

"Well, I had always held myself to be the greatest man alive, so yes, I presumed I was alive. And you testified that I was alive."

"I testified that I saw you were born. And you testified that you died. Neither of us has said anything about your confirmed existence between those events."

"You are very right about that. Django," called the King Of All Things, "Approach!"

Django drew near. "Yes, Sir?" he said nervously.

"Have you ever seen me alive?" the King asked.

"I have only ever seen you as you appear to be now."

"Dead?" asked the King, surprised.

"If that is what you are, you have always seemed so to me."

"Thank you, you may sit now." Django couldn't decide if that was better or worse. Then the King Of All Things turned to Martin. "So we do not know that I was ever alive for sure then?"

"This is so, and the Queen Of All Things is likely to give a similar testimony."

"Then it seems I've never, in fact, lived. Is this correct?"

"I'm afraid so. Whatever will the Queen think? How can you have a wake for someone who's never lived?"

The King Of All Things was flabbergasted for a moment. "You are absolutely right, Martin. If I've never lived, they will have nothing to talk about. The King Of All Things has never lived! I must fix this before it is too late!"

The King Of All Things stood to run for the door and Django was happy to go, but Martin grabbed the King by his sleeve and this made Django have to sit down again. "I have one last thing to say before you go and live a life worth mention, my King."

"Yes, Martin, what is that?"

"Perhaps we should not tell anyone aside from those who know already that you have passed, Sire. While its not a huge hindrance for you, who are so talented and could most assuredly impress people as the most alive dead person they've ever met, it would hurt your reputation as the most alive living person if people found out you've never lived before now."

The King Of All Things, standing in his bathrobe in the grandest house in the world, reflected on this notion. "You are correct as always, Martin. Please keep this to yourself, as I know you will."

"How can I keep it to myself, Sire, when it is and always will be yours?"

The King Of All Things laughed, "Very true, my friend. But that is a problem for another day! I have a life to live! Django, call out the dogs!"

The King Of All Things, and his wife, happy to be doing something in preparation for his wake, and Django, after he had changed his pants because they were producing a faint odor of urine, all set out with the King's men and the King's horses. Martin, who abstained, left through the King's side entrance, and walked along the snowy trail to the local village wherein he lived, thinking to himself all the way that this was a simpler time he lived in, and wondering what exactly that meant.

