

A Country Between Two People

Verity

We were in love when we were seventeen. We split the rent evenly, us two and the other roommate. She and I were in love. The roommate was just waiting for King Arthur. She'd sit on the kitchen counter while I put hash browns in the pan and boiled eggs and made coffee, and she'd tell me about how we were going to run away together and fake our deaths and not have to see the people that knew us. Then the roommate would come in and eat four hash browns with ketchup and say stuff like 'He will walk the earth again, holding the sword in the stone, he will slay all who have wronged us, the once and future king.' That's just how it was. We liked it that way and we didn't want it to change, but of course it did.

I don't know exactly when it changed. Tuesday morning, I remember, started as usual. I was doing the dishes and she sat on the counter, with her bare legs dangling.

'I want a house that's ours,' she said, 'where we can be together. It is a vision of a country. As women we have no country, but when we are together, we will have one. Did you know it only takes two people to make a country?'

'No. Is that true?'

'Absolutely. Britain is not my country. It's not your country, either. But you and me together, we will make it our country. We will go and buy groceries in a house of our own, and it will be our country.'

'I understand.'

'We'll make it habitable. It won't be a country with peace or war or famine, it'll be a country with two people. The land between our bodies, the borders will follow us around. We'll give in to daily life. Won't be settling. Just giving in. Share rent. Kiss in rooms that nobody else is in. Britain, but not really. A country inside a country. Driving downtown for groceries, neither of us will speak, I'll be driving, and you'll have your hand on my thigh — in my country I will have a car, by the way, no more bicycles.'

'Fuck bicycles. Fuck scooters. Fuck TfL,' I said.

'You're getting it! Our country, me reaching out for you. We'll be so free we'll smoke indoors.'

She stopped to kiss the back of my neck as I put a plate on the rack.

‘Will we have a flag?’ I asked her.

‘I haven’t thought about it. I don’t think we need one.’

‘King Arthur shall rise, wield the sword of fate,’ the roommate said, shuffling in the kitchen, eternally unaware. It could be that he hadn’t noticed we were there. He simply didn’t care, and he didn’t do anything all day. He didn’t work. He was on the dole. And he certainly wasn’t looking for work, either, because he wouldn’t need that. He was deeply convinced that soon he’d be a knight, and justice would prevail.

‘Hiya,’ I said, rinsing a fork.

‘I dreamt of Excalibur again,’ he announced, ‘it is shining. I can feel it growing impatient. He will come very soon. It’s only a matter of days now. It could be five days, maximum.’

‘We’ll be in our country by then,’ she whispered, and kissed the top of my head.

‘How will you know it’s him?’ I asked, turning off the faucet and wiping my hand on a towel.

‘The sight of him — you’ll remember it all your life, like first love. The hash browns are cold.’

‘There’s the stove,’ she said, ‘do the legwork.’

He warmed them up, squeezed ketchup on the side. He sat at the table, and we joined him. He meant no harm. And we both really liked him; we liked his conviction. He didn’t have doubts, he didn’t get discouraged.

‘How are you, girls?’

‘Getting by,’ I said.

‘Only getting by? What’s wrong?’

There was a slight shift, then, which I didn’t notice at the time. She set three teacups on the table, a pack of biscuits in the middle. She poured all three of us some tea and brought the sugar bowl and the oat milk, the one that was 50p a carton, and was so diluted that rainwater would’ve done the job better. I’d left his question hanging, so she responded.

‘I feel like we’re a bit too young.’

‘Bollocks to that. Arthur was only fifteen when he was crowned king.’

By the end of the morning, the roommate had somehow convinced us to follow him into Sydenham Hill Wood to look for signs of Arthur. Points were made by both parties. We said that Sydenham Hill Wood had absolutely nothing to do with the forest of the legends, that we'd have better luck strolling around in the dead of night and hoping he'd appear, that it was not a good plan and maybe he should go with somebody else. He said that he had an inkling, saw an omen in a dream, and there was no harm in trying. And it was a nice day, too, it would only drizzle in the afternoon. He was tough to argue with. He made us all sandwiches, he got his gear, and we got our coats, and made our way. We were still young and in love, I believe, when we got to Brixton. It's hard to think back now. I certainly remember squeezing her hand on the bus, and she squeezed back.

The roommate wandered around for a while, looking behind trees and such.

'What did you mean when you said we are too young?' I asked her.

'Don't know. Just a thing I said. Didn't mean nothing by it.'

'Well, you must've meant something by it, else you wouldn't have said it.'

'Just that we're seventeen is all.'

'You'll be eighteen in a month! And I'm not far behind.'

'It's not that.'

'Won't it be alright, if you're eighteen and I'm seventeen?'

'It's not that.'

'ARTHUR! Show yourself, my liege!' He howled at the top of his lungs.

We passed the fake Victorian ruins that had now become real ruins. I thought the roommate might be excited by them, but he wasn't. He didn't even acknowledge the half-arch and the moss-covered stones. A couple strolled by. A man in a puffer jacket and a girl wearing a zip-on jacket, with her hair pulled in a bun and the hood over her head. The man gave us a subtle look while his girlfriend yanked at his arm and picked up the pace.

'We've lost our dog,' I told him.

He nodded and went on. He didn't believe me, and the roommate didn't back up my story at all.

'Reveal yourself, bring justice to the kingdom of men!' he screamed.

'Will you keep it down?' I told him.

'Why?'

‘He’s the immortal king, he’s not deaf!’

‘Alright,’ he said, and carried on quietly, ‘come forth, come forth and I will serve you.’

‘They’re going to think we’re soliciting,’ she whispered.

‘Couple’s long gone.’

I checked the path, and sure enough it was empty. We were silent for a little while; ate the sandwiches he made us. It was quite dry and warm. It felt alright, the spring would come early, without harshness.

‘What about our country?’ I asked her.

‘What about it?’

‘Just this morning you talked about our country.’

‘We’re not breaking up,’ she said.

‘Doesn’t sound like we’re alright, though.’

‘You know, maybe we’re not alright.’

‘Arthur,’ he said gloomily, ‘where are you?’

‘Could you please look for Arthur a little further away? We’re going through something here.’

I think he was hurt by this, but he walked away from us, a little sad that we weren’t helping him. I felt a bit guilty. He’d been excited that we were accompanying him, so excited he’d made us sandwiches.

‘What the hell do you mean we’re not alright?’ I asked.

‘Maybe we’re too young to start our country. I feel it when I’m with you but then... sometimes I don’t. Feel it, I mean.’

‘Feel what?’

‘You know!’

‘What?’

‘You and me, that’s what.’

I was not going to cry. I was going to be serious and smooth.

‘I do love you,’ she said, and I wanted to take that two-letter word in the middle and beat it to death.

‘I’m going to look for King Arthur,’ I said, and walked away as fast as I could.

‘So, we can’t even have a conversation? Is this it?’ she said.

I rushed to catch up with him.

‘Sorry about before, mate,’ I said, and wiped the tears from my eyes, not allowing them to form.

‘Alright. Are you two...?’

‘No idea. ARTHUR! Get off your arse and bring your sword!’ I shouted. It felt good to shout. She wanted to carry on with our breakup, but I wasn’t going to let her. The roommate and I paraded around the forest, howling and yelping for Arthur, pleading, and screaming like crazy people. I tried not to think about the bus ride back. I focused on repeating ‘ARTHUR, ARTHUR, ARTHUR,’ until my throat was sore, and I was all out of breath, and it was the end of the road. We crossed the bridge in a hurry, all three of us. Underneath, I saw a burnt-out scooter, missing one of its wheels.

‘It’s over,’ she told me on the way back.

‘You said we weren’t breaking up.’

She didn’t reply. We had no country again, just like before. But I’d felt it — for a moment, what it was to have a country. I couldn’t forget it.

Friday morning, she packed all her stuff in cardboard boxes and stuffed them into her brother’s car and moved in with him. She told me she’d miss me on the porch, then I watched the car turn at the end of the street. I didn’t have anyone to go to, so I went back inside.

‘Tea?’ the roommate asked.

‘Thank you.’

‘I heard the creak of the stone today, it’s a dry sound. His hand is hot. It needs the sword.’

He looked tired; his hair was messy. He seemed worried. I wondered if he’d started questioning himself, but he hadn’t. He knew Arthur would come. I tried to tell him about what it is to make a country with two people, about how immigrant kids feel like they have no country, and when they love each other, they make a country. He reached to hug me, awkwardly, but he didn’t know what to say. He told me that we will all have a country when Arthur comes.

I crawled into bed and pulled the covers up to my chin. I felt heavy and awful, and I didn’t understand what it was that made everything complex instead of simple and free. It was half past six in the morning when the roommate woke me up, shaking the bed as gently as he could.

‘Sorry to bother you, but you’ve got to see this. Get dressed. Get your coat.’

‘What?’

‘Please! Make haste!’

He left me to get dressed. I got into my slippers and wrapped a long coat around my body and walked to the living room. He’d fully opened the big window, taken out the little stopper screw and pushed it all the way. He was hanging on the windowsill, ready to leap to the street.

‘What on earth?’

‘King Arthur,’ he whispered.

I moved carefully, until I saw his eyes in the shy dawn’s light and knew he didn’t plan to jump. It wasn’t despair that clouded his gaze. It was awe and certainty. In the backdrop of red brick houses and black railings, I saw a tall man who missed half the steps he dared to take. A short spell of silence breezed through us. Why were we both crying?

‘You know, we were going to be a country,’ I said.

‘Look at him.’

I did. He had Excalibur in his hand, his shoes were stuffed with newspapers, the soles had come apart. He walked, in his own good time, in the middle of the road. The sun was rising. His eyes were golden.

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