

THE MAN WHO WOULD BE KING

It's Wednesday morning and I've found myself in an unfortunate green-teal waiting room. Through a nearby window, I see a bright sun emerging from behind the clouds. Yesterday's rain is evaporating; the puddles will be gone by noon. The day is already an optimistic one. It's the best sunny days that follow rain.

But I am separated from all that by aluminium venetians and the deathbed glow of fluorescent lights.

The room resembles a doctor's office, or the headquarters of some low order corporate operation. It has an unmistakably psychiatric feel. But it is none of these. I am in the waiting room of a church. Today I am going to make my first confession.

By now I'm used cheap parishes, but I once imagined chapels to be more renaissance than this. Maybe that says more about me and the ignorance of my upbringing. I was not raised Christian. My family had a vague affiliation with Judaism, but for the most part we were a secular bunch. And, although I'm not proud to admit it, we had always treated religion with cynical derision. The thing of fanatics and lesser minds, at best a medicine for the sentimental and injured. We tended to the tangible, to the realistic and measurable. Generous in a by-the-numbers way; ready to donate however many dollars to any cause that could soundly justify its existence, or support friends and family should they reach out in desperation.

I suppose it was inevitable that such a by-the-numbers upbringing led me to study law. I'd graduated school without a clue as to my future, but with a hunger to make something of myself, and a family encouraging me to produce something of note. I hadn't excelled at much – I was always more of B+ student than A – but I had enough cunning to know how to position myself. I figured I only had one life and that I should go about maximising my potential as quick as possible. In this way I was more Stalin than Lenin, more Nixon than Lincoln, a manipulator not a leader. Not a figurehead like Washington, nor an intellectual craftsman like Franklin or Trotsky, but an opportunist, who used whatever or whomever I could to rise in rank. This might

sound harsh, but I believed the position wholeheartedly. The gymnast, the track runner, the javelin thrower, they all used natural ability to gain prestige; no one condemned them. No one demanded a person blessed with beauty be a doctor instead of model or actor. Life appeared to me to be the sport of gaming your abilities to win whatever spoils you can. And if all I had was a Nietzschean Will to Power, then I ought to indulge my ever-present ability to sniff out opportunity and ascend social hierarchies.

I'd known I had this power since childhood, but it was in the final year of university that I found just how far I could extend it. It was the year my mum was diagnosed. They discovered a metastatic tumour in her brain, originating from a cancerous growth in the lung. Six months was what they gave her, to live that is, and then they set about blasting her with a multiplicity of microwaves, gamma waves, blood thinners and thickeners, exercise regimes and dietary mandates. She deteriorated rapidly.

It was in this same period that I met Madeline. It was a Freudian kind of connection: dying mother, new romantic interest. Perhaps I looking to swap one maternal figure for the next. I remember the day impeccably: I was walking from one class to the next, trying not to think of mum, when I saw Madeline. She was manning a stall on the uni's south lawn. And she was beautiful. That's all I really noticed at first. I couldn't help looking at her. She had a gravitational effect on me. I was pulled into her world, and wanted to linger there for a long, long time. But I diverted attention back to my studies and thoughts of my dying mum returned and so I headed to class.

At the time, I was going out with a boy called Sister. I don't know how he had earned the nickname, but everyone knew him by it. Sister was a real northsider, that type of Melburnian so clearly bred in councils like Darebin and Moreland. His fashion sense was the first give away: op-shop trench coats, once worn by the now-deceased, matched with loud 70s shirts and an array of Middle Eastern jewellery.

Sister and I would study together in the uni library. There, while I studied, he would boast loud enough for neighbouring groups to hear about whatever rave, festival or house party he'd attended that weekend, and who had slept with whom, and what so-and-so had put up their nose. He introduced me to Melbourne's cultural underbelly, he was a fanatic for the art scene; so through Sister I learned the names of all the local bands and film festivals. I became acquainted with the key operatives, the people who everyone believed were "going somewhere". There was a currency within this circle that I was required to master, and over the course of my undergraduate years, master it I did. I grew fluent in their language; able to tell their kind of jokes, which were typically drug-related; to parse their niche artistic references; to espouse their vague and undefined philosophy, which drew from a soup of radical activist politics, infantile readings of classical philosophy and incredibly mundane self-help books.

But by fourth year undergrad, I was getting bored of the northside thing. Its potential was limited; one big circle-jerk in which a select few flourished, while the rest survived on the fumes of their own ego. I contrasted them against the kids in my law classes, whose parents had taught them the real game of life, that of money and status, and in my law peers I saw something far more brutal and honest. There was far less hope, flair or fun, sure. But there were no delusions either.

I decided it was time to change track. To escape the uni-sphere and exact my will upon the real, adult world. I doubled attention upon my law classes and kept up with a wide range of extra-curricular activities. I was to become an adult, to rise above the private-school competition with whom I shared a classroom, trust fund kids with a 12-year head start on me. Everything started to fall into place. I found I could obtain anything I wanted; everything in the grasp of my social climbing abilities. There was just one final piece I needed on the road to domination: a respectable partner. Someone to embody the envy I wished to inspire in others.

You see, beauty was the one thing eluding me. I had good grades and a commendable social position, but in the way I was a B+ student, I was cursed with B+ looks. Handsome enough. By no means ugly, but by no means desirable either. One eye was slightly lazy. My

jaw a little too sharp. In short, just another average schmuck, unable to reach the top shelf stuff. It grated me. I couldn't stand to think that anything was beyond my achievement. So, determined to double down against this insecurity, to prove my mastery of it to the world, I set my skills as a manipulator to the test. And Madeline would be my golden ticket.

She was the antithesis of Sister. While he was northside, she had been raised in the southern suburbs. He was born poor; she was the air to a chain of florists. While he jumped between majors – from Anthropology to Ancient World Studies to Korean Mysticism – Madeline stuck to chemical engineering. And she was quieter, with none of his braggart confidence. Sister had the ability to command a room, there was no doubt about it. He could use his larger-than-life personality to force stories on a large group, the kind of stories that make whole rooms laugh but which no one finds funny. Meanwhile, Madeline had no ambition to win over a room.

She rarely spoke in her classes and was happy to allow others to talk instead of her. She had no strong opinions or flashy jokes, nor did she celebrate her eccentricities like all those northside kids. But she was far from powerless. Where Sister was one big show, Madeline wielded intimacy. In a one-on-one dialogue, she was director. She'd let you talk for as long as you liked or prod you with all the right questions. She could entertain the dullest of conversationalists. Passivity was her form of control, through which she lulled whomever she spoke to – friends, lovers, professors – into a false sense of comfort. She hid her internal world well. I had to believe it was deliberate, a grand play.

And she was beautiful. There were no two ways about it. Sister was attractive, sure, but he relied on his personality to great effect. The way he dressed, the attitude he presented, this all took him a long way. He knew how to hide his weak spots and play up his strengths. But he couldn't compare to Madeline. He was all ornamentation. Of the trophies hung above the fireplace of big game hunters, the largest, most impressive antlers would have belonged to him. But there was no head to mount. He was antlers alone. Upon realising this, I found him quite sad.

Attracted into her orbit, I began attending Madeline's stall on the uni lawn, with the intention of one day going out with her. The first time we met face-to-face, we talked for about 20 minutes. It only took me half that to find my way in.

It turned out she belonged to one of the campus' sectarian Christian clubs. It was this club who ran the stall she volunteered at, turning up for a couple of hours twice a week. It happened that one of these shifts coincided with my lunch break, so I joined her there on a regular basis, presenting myself as Christianity-curious. I knew there was nothing so attractive to a believer as a potential convert.

My instinct paid off. Madeline and her friends welcomed me with open arms. They had a naivety that I found easy to exploit. Most of the group had known each other since Christian preschool and were ill-equipped and unprepared to defend against the motives of outsiders. Compared to the northside art group, they were amateur players, and I felt that my time with Sister had been a worthwhile training exercise. Thrown in the deep end, I could swim with ease in the shallows.

I devoted equal attention to each member of the group, ingratiating myself into the friendship circle and winning their confidence one person at a time. But I also played hard to get, never revealing whether the hours of Christian proselyting were having any effect upon me. I remained agnostic, and therefore utterly desirable. By placing my soul just out of reach, I ensured that – if they sincerely want to save me from eternal damnation – they better send their best. And that they did. I became the grand prize for the most flattering, most persuasive of them all: Madeline.

Making her love me was harder than I expected, but inevitably it worked. I had a good system in those days and even though she was more resistant than most, she eventually fell for me. It took two years before we were official dating, but I had expected it to take so long; the religious thing meant the whole group were thinking long-term. On the hunt for wives and

husbands. I always laughed thinking back to Sister and the northside scene, where everyone was polyamorous and unrepressed. How quaint these Christians were.

I attended their study sessions, their Church services, the after-Church-brunches. I was a regular at Wednesday boardgame nights. They were not so different from other uni kids. They lacked the cynicism of Sister's scene, but they were after the same things, just in different configurations. People only want so much. Food, shelter, reassurance, comfort. The point of difference is how they go about obtaining these things. Studying Madeline's group, an imposter among them, I saw what the human race had really been up to this whole time; we had spent centuries constructing vast ideological systems to simply pursue the essentials with greater pageantry.

As imposter, I saw the games everyone played around each other. I was not alone in my Machiavellianism; it was only that I saw beyond the pretences. Even among the Christians, the weapons of good-looks, intelligence, cunning, social standing, were all in use. Even among these supposed good folk, competition was rampant.

But Madeline did not see such things. And, as the years gnawed away, this started to pain me. I was operating on totally foreign terms to her, while abiding by her imagined code of ethics. It required endless endurance. I found it exhausting.

We married four years into the relationship. I began working as a barrister, making a small name for myself in the local law scene. My free time dwindled, and even that was overtaken by Church-related activities.

Once married, I realised that Madeline wasn't particularly smart. She'd graduated with a degree in chemical engineering but lacked a mind for anything else. She was "intelligent", but she wasn't *intelligent*. Her attention couldn't stay on any in-depth topic too long. She didn't read or practice an art. Most of her days were spent in a reactive haze. I had thought she hid her internal world well; after several years I realised she had no internal world whatsoever. Sex was awful. Conversation was awful.

But she remained beautiful. And in time, I grew to resent her beauty.

It had lured me in. I was trapped. Held hostage by a world of ethics, to Christian notions of greed, lust, envy, and prisoner to their most deranged concept of all: sin.

Where I saw only the possible and the impossible, they saw good and evil; right and wrong. Stalin didn't care about sin. Milhouse Nixon wouldn't have given a damn. But here I was, surrounded by it, unable to escape. At Church services, the priests entertained long philosophical sermons on its origins, of its effects, urging me to always denounce it. At home, Madeline would use the word constantly, convinced that sin tainted even our simple family life. She and her circle, and I began to suppose most people, believed evil to be an elemental force that we all must combat. A tangible, corrupting phenomenon that had to be actively fought against.

I started wondering if they were correct. And if so, if sin was a force to be eternally resisted and if I had never bothered or concerned myself to do so, then a possibility occurred to me that left me terrified: what if I was evil?

I had, in a sad, meek, unintentional way, become a Christian. I was now versed well enough in their concepts to know how totally I had failed said concepts. I was a sinful soul, trapped in the life of a simple Christian man. They had caged me. I had caged myself. I imagined myself to be the serpent, the very one from Genesis, lured by Eve for round two. This time, it would be me who bit the apple. She and God had set a trap; I would be the one cursed with forbidden knowledge. Cursed to know that it was possible to wrong the world, and if so then I was as guilty as they come.

I had no exterior vent for these concerns; Sister and the cynics were long gone. My social circle was only people operating on assumptions of kindness and love, terms that I had no conviction in, which I derided and used to my advantage. I had snuck into their paradigm like a cat into the tire. Well, now I had no freedom. My Stalin-Nixon complex had cursed me

to eternal loneliness and robbed me of my agency. My life was dictated by the terms of others, trapped there by the promise of winning Madeline.

Perhaps I could leave her. My old self would have had no qualms about escaping this prison. Of divorcing Madeline, tearing up my Church membership, fleeing to another city, another country. But I had spent so long building this life of mine. My cunning had won me the cheap prizes of youth, but it would not work the same in middle age. An adult life required more substance; I lacked the faculty to accomplish this. I had become dependent on the things I'd won in my twenties.

And there was one more thing that stopped me from leaving. This was the most embarrassing part of it all. I knew that if I left, it would hurt Madeline. And the Christians had taught me enough about sin, just enough at this point, to know that this it was wrong to hurt others. They had domesticated me.

So, I decided to confess to a priest, to release at least a little of this evil inside me. At last, a true Christian.

Now I'm sitting in this green-teal waiting room, as a sunny day escapes me outside. I play with my car keys, counting the seconds before I go to the confessional box.

I hear the priest call my name and rise from my pew. As I do, I hear a familiar voice. I turn to see Sister enter the waiting room.

A quick look tells me age has affected him worse than me. A mess of tattoos are blotted around his neck. He's dressed in a baggy pink tracksuit and has a septum piercing. He lacks the confidence of his uni days. There's something hurt in the way he approaches me, like a dog with a bung foot.

We try to survive the initial awkwardness. He tells me he's been working at an audio equipment rental store. He likes the job; through it he gets to meet interesting people. He's six months sober. He credits the priest at this church for that.

He asks about me. I fill him in on the basics, including some of the religious stuff. He laughs and says never in a million years would he have guessed I'd turn bible basher.

I hear the priest call for me again. Before I go in, I am compelled to tell Sister the truth, that I am the lowest, most unworthy of the worshippers. I blurt it out in a rushed garble.

Sister takes a second to reply. When he does, he tells me it's better to stray from the path and return than to have never left it. He says it's better to know both options and still make the right choice.

A great answer, but I know it doesn't absolve me one bit. I am cursed to live the rest of my days a greedy soul chained to this pious body. I remember how my family thought religion a thing for fanatics and lesser minds, for the sentimental and injured. I wonder which I am.

Leaving Sister, I meet with the priest. I start the confession with a meek, "Forgive me father, for I have sinned."