

ROYALS

“That’s what I’m saying,” the Duchess told a girlfriend on the phone. “Right. We won the freaking lottery.” She held a burning Marlboro in the ‘V’ of her two longest fingers, straight above her elbow on the arm of the sofa. With the windows propped open, smoke from the living room blew straight across me and my peanut butter sandwich at the kitchen table. “No, only two known winning tickets, and we have to call the office up at the state capitol. No one’s answering the phone up there today, of course, but we call tomorrow, get an appointment, and roll up there to claim the money,” she fielded more questions from the other end of the line. “Oh, I don’t know. One minute, I lean toward taking the annual payments, but then the next, I just don’t know. Duke says he wants his money now. All up front.”

The screen door to the front porch swung open. Duke was smoking in the aluminum swing out there when he heard her call his name. He’s a burly man with features like the Neanderthals on that history show I like that always look angry or frustrated with his immediate surroundings. He came in hunched over, waving his arms across each other in front of him, like a referee signaling an incomplete pass.

“I don’t know,” Duchess was saying, “half of eleven million. Minus taxes, they say. Whatever that will be.” Duke emphatically mouthed the words, ‘no, no, no’ and made a gesture for her to hang up.

“Hey, gotta go,” Duchess wound it down, “Check online later. You’ll see what I’m talking about. Yeah.”

“We don’t need to tell everybody our business,” Duke blustered, and he reached to bounce his index finger against her knee as he spoke. “I thought I told you that.”

“How you gonna not tell those close to you about it?” she asked. “Can you answer me that?”

“Just keep your damn pie-hole shut. That’s how,” was Duke’s advice.

“Now look here, ‘kay?” she angled. “Just let me take a picture of the ticket with my phone. Put it up on Facebook and that way, only my friends can see it.” The Duke decided years ago he’d be dead before he ever needed to know anything about computers, and wasn’t sure he liked this idea. Then, he figured that picture might be a good excuse not to pull the ticket out of his wallet anytime anyone wanted to see.

“Alright, but it’ll be a picture of me holding it. In these hands. Ain’t nobody touching this ticket but me,” Duke concluded. “Me and a certified official of the state lottery.” I had to get going or be late for work. “Say listen, Buck-o,” he called after me, “do us a solid and keep this to yourself, will ya? Not everyone has to know.”

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It was a slow day at Copy Shoppe with everyone home for the holiday. Mr. Greer said he should have closed up the place, took a day off, too. The only thing out of the ordinary was the post it note to call Mr. Bellamy before I left work that day. I did.

“Nope, decided not to fight the crowds and stayed home,” he told me. “Too hot to get out on the lake anyway.” He said he’d be at his home office for the rest of the day. “I’d like to have you and your sister come by to discuss a little matter that’s come up.”

“Can’t make it, babe,” the Duchess replied when I called home and asked her to meet me. “Got a mani and a pedi scheduled, and an appointment to meet with the travel agent.” Her next few lines were a boiling pot of banter with words like cruise ship, Caymans, and Cozumel bubbling to the top. “You go on without me, Jason honey. You can fill me in on all the details later.” I could hear the hard drag and long exhale in the ear piece. “And tell old man Greer he’ll have to hire someone else to take my shifts at his fine commercial enterprise from now on. Too many other commitments at this time.” That last part wasn’t meant for my benefit. Mr. Greer fired her last week for sassing customers and cut a final check. I saw him put it in her hand.

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Mister Bellamy was more like family than a friend. He knew my Dad in high school, got drafted about the same time, but was deployed to where he didn’t get eat up with the Agent Orange. He took a law degree when he left the service and came back to handle small town legal issues in the place where he grew up. He was like a superhero in a business suit, with a briefcase full of magic wands. When Mama went and got herself killed without leaving a will, he took on this probate thing for us. We didn’t know how we would pay for his services, but he told us not to worry about that. “Pro bono,” is what he called it. That’s the kind of family treatment I’m talking about.

I've known him and been to his house ever since I was a little kid. That's probably why I'm comfortable enough talking to him so I don't hardly stutter, more than just a little bit, and when I do he has a way of easing the conversation right on through it.

"Where's your sister, Kimberly?" was the first thing he asked. We were sitting inside the screened porch just outside the room he used as his home office. There were papers on the wicker end table under the cool crystal pyramid paperweight I remember from long ago.

"Not coming," I told him straight away, "Her and Duke are wo-wer-work," the words hung, "work-ing. On something big."

"Duke who?" Bellamy arched his eyebrows.

"Bub-Billy," I explained, "my in-law brother."

"Oh, yeah," the old man still had a young laugh, "I think I remember that now."

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Not long after Dad was institutionalized, my sister's personality disorder started to get out of hand. Not like it hadn't been trouble way before that. Her moods swung so bad from peak to valley, it was hard for her and Billy to be in that apartment together for any length of time. Sometimes, it was 'he threw me out,' and she ended up under blankets on the sofa in our narrow living room for days. Mama would check under there every now and then to see if she was hungry, or still breathing.

Other times, she 'had it up to here' and was leaving that selfish son of a female dog for good. There she'd be, talking on her phone, playing some farm animal game on the laptop, smoking cigarettes, propped up on the sofa with pillows snatched from Mama's bed. It didn't

matter. Either way, she sucked all the air and space from the living room and it was lost to anyone else. I sure missed watching my shows. With Dad living permanent in the VA hospital, there was a big void in the order giving department and Kimberly sure took that opportunity to step up her game. Mama served her meals in the living room, ran her errands, and because of her constant, demanding nature, took to calling her “Duchess.”

Then one day, I remember it like it’s happening right before my eyes, here comes Billy with a wilted bouquet from Wynn-Dixie. He drops down on one of those tree trunk knees right there in front of the sofa and tells Kimberly he’s sorry and has to get her back. I’m sitting at the kitchen table with Mama, pushing my coffee cup back and forth over a cigarette burn in the Formica, while the whole thing plays out on the other side of the open archway. Duchess throws her arm around his neck and pulls him to her. Swollen, fluttering eyelids and flapping lips spray a salty mist in the empty space around their heads. Both are saying how sorry they are between sobs. She grunts out a low moan, “Tell me we’ll never spend another day apart.”

“Oh,” he says, shoulder blades bucking up and down with the emotion of the moment, “you know it baby. You’re my ever thing.”

“Well,” Mama looks up across the table and says to me, “Sound the trumpets. I guess the Duke has arrived.” She could always find something nice to say about anybody. “I’m just grateful she could find someone of her own kind.”

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“So, they’re Royals, eh?” Mr. Bellamy asked through his wide smile.

“Act like it. Ac-act like they think they are,” was my opinion.

“Or more like a royal pain,” was part of a joke he was making. “A royal pain in the . . .”

“Rear end,” I said for him. Mama always told me there were good words to use and those better left unsaid. Now that she’s gone, that’s one way I serve her memory.

“Yeah,” Mr. B. said, “I guess so. And, as it happens, it’s Duke who brings us together today.” Then he went on to tell about, what he called, ‘the situation.’ Downtown on Friday, when he entered the conference room for a two o’clock with a Mr. Sullivan, he was surprised to see who was sitting across the table.

Back when Duke tried to hire him for his car injury law suit, Bellamy declined. Told him he might best be served seeking representation elsewhere. He advised that the courts were in ‘response mode’ to a rash of cases made public over the last few years.

“Just take a look through the high number cable channels,” the attorney directed. “There are shows debunking fraud suits broadcast several times a week.”

“I know,” the Duke told him. “After that old bag clipped me in the intersection, that’s where I got the idea.”

Within the year, he was back in Mr. Bellamy’s office to present a retainer on behalf of the Duchess and me, as second generation survivors of Agent Orange victims. He didn’t care who it was got sued; Monsanto, Dow, the Veteran’s Administration, but my stutter and learning disabilities, along with my sister’s mental illness provided clear evidence of resulting birth defects.

“We deserved to get paid behind all that,” Duke told him. Mr. Bellamy ended that meeting telling Billy he would not be representing him, then or in the future. But Duke had

nerve to come back on Friday, sitting across the conference table, with a copy of a last will and testament naming my sister as executor of Mama's estate.

"Been going through Marilyn's things," he told the attorney, "this is what we come across."

"You found this by itself?" Mr. Bellamy wanted to know.

"There were some photos, mementos, things like that." Duke avoided eye contact to the point where Mr. Bellamy thought tiny insects must be flying around his head.

"I meant the original," Bellamy told him. "I'll keep this with the other records. Keep looking, though. The original document will be a big help in finalizing the files."

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Mr. Greer said he was sorry he had to fire Kimberly, but in this business, you couldn't afford to run off customers. She had one of those days last week when she was the brightest, most competent person in this world, and anyone who didn't appreciate that was either ungrateful or not smart enough to understand. I guess that's about the one thing Duke and her had in common, only he was like that each and every day. The Duchess informed the lady, who wanted formal invitations for her daughter's 16th birthday party, her personal design looked 'unprofessional.' She told the delivery company owner, who wanted boxes of invoice pads printed up, his whole process was 'stupid.' It didn't help that Duke would come with her on her shifts, sometimes, stand in front of the shop smoking or, worse yet, come around to hunker down at the desk behind the counter and monkey with the equipment. When the boss told the Duchess that he had to let her go, she told him he could go and, well, have sexual intercourse with himself for all she cared. The good news was, Mr. Greer said he would rather not go through training

anyone else for the job and, if I wanted to pick up her hours, I could work up to 39 and ½ hours a week. I sure needed the money to put toward the house note.

Last month, Duchess said they were “coming up a little bit light this time, but we’ll get this thing straightened out. Duke and I are realigning our budget categories.” Near as I could see, those categories were vodka, cigarettes, fast food, lotto tickets, and two liter soda bottles. There wasn’t much left to chip in toward the mortgage.

They would argue over finances. It wasn’t like a secret or anything. Come to find out, what Duke meant by ‘getting her back’ was, two months behind on apartment rent, he would now be making their love nest into our tight four room, one bath home. Mama let it slip about coming home to find them pulling my stuff out while I was at work so they could move into my bedroom. When she told them that ‘wasn’t happening,’ Duke came back with a borrowed nail gun to shoot wood strips to the floor and ceiling. He stapled up an old sheet and shower curtain from the linen closet to screen off a large rectangle in the living room as private space. That set up the disturbing nightly silhouette shows and, because they never thought to tone it down, their natural speaking voices left little doubt about whatever nonsense bristled between them.

It got louder after Mama died. They wasted no time moving into her bedroom, across the narrow hallway from mine, making themselves at home behind those thin walls. From then on, without a choice, I was a silent witness to all their plans.

“I thought you said we could move down there,” she spoke in that baby talk voice which, when talking finances, takes on its own kind of creepy. “That’s where you said you always wanted to go. Make the big bucks and start a new life.” I’d already heard parts of this many

times. Duke said he had a standing offer from a cousin who tapped into that NAFTA money and set up a trucking company down south.

“I told you to stop saying that,” Duke boomed back. “It’s not in Texas,” he explained one more time, “It’s Noo-wave-o Laredo.” I could hear him pacing while he talked. “It’s not even the states. I can’t work down there.” His tone resonated with the sad, unfairness behind it all. “You know me, baby. I’m just proud to be an American.” Bed springs grated and the frame squeaked when he plopped down. “Then there’s the heat, Arthur-itus getting to my knee . . .”

“It would just be nice, a regular paycheck, some benefits,” her volume was softer, as if pressed against his shoulder. “If Mama had just carried some life insurance, we wouldn’t be in this mess right now.”

“Insurance don’t pay for no suicide, anyway,” he countered. The springs squeaked again with sudden movement.

“But she was self-medicating, trying to get better,” Duchess almost squealed.

“Don’t matter how much she took of that Zoloft or Prozac you gave up on,” Duke spoke more slowly and tried to sound wise. “You’re in the middle of a city block. Step out in front of a moving city bus, people say that’s your plan.”

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I’m not sure Billy ever made the connection after Mama started referring to him as ‘Duke.’ He was a big John Wayne fan though and went right with it, to where he started to introduce himself that way. He came up with money for a personalized license plate, ‘1Duke-O’

was the closest thing not already taken, and mounted it on the Lumina when he got it running. It wasn't the Chevy he was thinking about, Tuesday evening when I got home.

"We're going to Disneyworld," I heard him shouting at the phone when I chained my bike to the front porch steps. The weeds were so tall in the front yard, the little bird bath Mama was so proud of looked like a puddle in a salt marsh. Maybe she felt like that was all she could control, but she kept it real neat and nice. With Duke not working, the agreement was for him to push the mower around the small square of grass as needed. I knew right then I would have to say something to him about it, and that made me feel like throwing up.

"Isn't that what they always say? When you win the Super Bowl, or World Series, Wheel of Fortune? Well, that's where we're going, goddam, after we drive . . ." I pulled open the screen door. "Nerd Alert," he called out at me, "Na-Na-Na-Nerd!" He pointed a finger with his free hand at arm's length. "After we drive up to the lottery commission office on Wednesday," he continued. "You're looking at her Facebook page? Yep, there it is." On the coffee table, the picture of the lottery ticket on the laptop screen clearly showed just the winning numbers, bordered by Duke's fat, sausage fingers, above and below. "I don't know, man," he was saying as I went in to the bathroom. Open a night club, maybe a Lamborghini dealership. I know, right? Just have to give it some careful . . ." The spray from the showerhead drowned him out.

The speech therapist from the county, when I was in high school, said it was a good idea to adopt what she called a 'bridge strategy' in responding to conversation. Whenever a response was required, pause, think, begin with a word like, "Well," and slide from there into what you need to say. By the time I left high school, my stutter left, too. People stopped looking at me like I was stupid or retarded or something. About the time the house started to fill up with

craziness, seemed like it came back strong. So, when I came out of the bathroom and Duke was off the phone, I went back to the old strategy.

“Well,” I began, and it hung for a moment too long, “wa-weeds are all in the gra-gr-grass, and . . .”

“Hell, don’t ya think I can see that?” He was sitting in the kitchen, eating a fried pie and tapping down a new pack of cigarettes against the table top. “But, when I was trying to fix the mower, the old spark plug broke half in two.” He pointed toward the window sill. “So, you and your simpleton ass need to carry those pieces down to O’Reilly’s. See if you can get a new one like it to fit in that old piece of crap out there.” I picked a used plastic bag off the top of the trash, dropped in the broken parts, and zipped the seal. “Hey, don’t worry about it,” Duke barked through the food in his mouth. “After Wednesday, I’ll send a crew of Ma-Ma-Mum-Mexicans over to cut the whole damn yard.”

“Well,” I started, then decided to go on out the back door instead. I don’t think Duke cared too much how Mama’s house looked. More than once, he called it names like ‘cardboard cracker box’ with a few cuss words mixed in. I cared. It was the only house I remembered living in. It was home to me.

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The day before, toward the end of my visit at Mr. Bellamy’s place, the conversation turned serious. He told me he had wanted to talk to me and my sister together, but maybe I could ‘shed some light.’

“Do you know what this is, Jason?” He handed me a piece of paper and I shook my head, no. “Have you ever seen this document before?” I said no to that, too. “This is a copy,”

he explained, “Actually, a copy of other copied text.” He turned it to where we both had a good look. “These parts are copied and pasted from different, incompatible in this state by the way, will and testament templates available online. This is a scan of your mother’s signature, inserted into one of the documents compiled here.” He held the paper up for the light from the window to show through. “This is an inserted scan of notary seal, and the design for this stamp was discontinued in the late 90’s.”

“So, wh- what does this all mean?”

“Oh, perhaps fraud, criminal intent, officially submitted last week to an officer of the court. By your brother-in-law.” He raised his eyebrows and let that notion float in the space between us. “Then yesterday morning, we get this message on the office recorder.” He pressed a number on his phone, paused, touched the screen a few times, and handed it to me. “Listen.”

“Hey, Mr. Bellamy. Looked all through this stuff for the original and we give up. You can just chuck that copy I brought you.” It was the Duke’s voice, somewhat more gravelly than usual, like he needed to cough something up. “It don’t make any difference now, anyway.”

“I will need to look into some things,” Mr. Bellamy told me, rubbing one hand over the other, as if massaging something held within. “Come back by here on your way home from work on Friday. I’ll let you know what I find out.”

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A couple of times I thought maybe I should feel bad about my part in the whole mess but, truth be told, I don’t. It’s not like I did anything on purpose. I went over to the Quik Chek that Sunday morning, like always, picked up the paper for the food coupons and TV Weekly, a tall coffee, and the fake ticket they print and set out to show Saturday night’s winning lotto

numbers. I don't have the money to play much, but it's fun to look and see if any of my lucky numbers got picked.

When I got home, I put the slip right there on the end table and dropped the paper in Dad's old Barcalounger. There's a good cross breeze through the house with the windows open. Near as I can figure, that little slip of paper blew off to the floor or under the edge of the sofa where Duke stashed his plastic pints of vodka, wallet and keys from the time he moved in. You look on those mock tickets, and right there in two places, the fine print says 'non-redeemable' and 'reproduction.' But Duke had a bad need for reading glasses and a murky memory.

"You don't remember where you bought the ticket?" I heard Duchess ask him sometime during those few wild days that changed everything.

"Naw, I don't remember where or when, but hey, I play every time," he reasoned, "I sure don't remember not buying one, either."

So, when he reached under the sofa feeling for a bottle or loose change, found that slip and checked it against the numbers in the morning paper, I'm sure he believed his long overdue ship just came in. From that point on, he didn't let anyone touch the ticket, or even look at it, unless he clutched it firmly in both hands, raised to eye level for them to see.

The Duchess wanted to rent a limo for the ride up to the state capitol, but the deposit charge exceeded remaining limits on any credit card either one of them had. They weren't comfortable counting on the Lumina to make it, with the odometer showing 97,000 hard miles, so they did a one week lease on a compact import. I heard them rattling in the kitchen Wednesday morning a couple hours before I had to get up. Car doors slammed and they were gone before dawn.

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“A fly on the wall . . . ,” Mr. Bellamy asked, “or in the back seat on the drive home? Wouldn’t you?”

“Nn - No sir. Well,” I took a sip of iced tea and started again, “I can honestly say I wouldn’t.” The conversation on the porch that afternoon started with Mr. B asking me to tell him everything I knew about the situation, and he would do the same. I didn’t think I had much to tell, but that’s what I did.

When I got home from work that evening, the lease car was back, parked in the front yard. Inside, it seemed like no was one home. The door to Mama’s room was closed. I was about to open the door and peek in when I heard them shuffling around in there. It stayed quiet. I can’t remember another time when those two were in the same place for so long without hollering something at each other. I was lying on my bed when I heard Duke go for cigarettes and my sister get on the phone.

“They wanted to see photo ID and social before anything else,” Duchess told the friend on the other end of the line. I heard what I could because she spoke quietly, for her, in a voice from our childhood. I used to call it the ‘far away, fairytale pretend’ voice, where she talks about real life events as if they didn’t, couldn’t ever, happen that way. “We were greeted at the front desk and they walked us right in,” she explained. “I tell you what; it was all very tense in that office when Duke pulled the wallet out, unfolded the ticket, and handed it across the desk,” she took a long, dramatic pause. “Before he touched it, the Deputy Commissioner asked if we had signed the back. Duke said ‘ohyouknowit, yessir.’ The official looked from the ticket, to Duke,

to me, then back to the slip of paper in his hands before asking the photographers to leave the room.”

She went on to tell how they didn't speak to each other for thirty minutes or more on the way home, but when the yelling started they couldn't stop. She told him she couldn't stand another minute in the car with anyone that stupid, so he pulled into the next rest stop to let her out. She said no, he was the one should be getting out. So he did. She slid over to the driver's side and drove two exits down the highway before spotting the state trooper. That reminded her she never got her license renewed so she turned around and went back. “Yep, there he was, catching a smoke, drinking a Fanta, staring at a map on the wall outside the men's room.”

I explained to Mr. Bellamy, “We could hear Duke coming through the squeaky screen door, and I guess she hung up.” I explained that I was tired, fell asleep until it was time to get up for work. When I got home that evening, the house was open and odd things were missing; towels, pillows, table lamps, and most of the canned goods from the pantry. In Mama's old room, the dresser drawers were open and all their clothes were gone. To me,” I said to Mr. B. “it looked like they left in a hurry.”

“Well Jason, that could very well be. Within two hours after my associates' visit to your house yesterday afternoon, your sister emailed my office a forwarding address. It was a business address,” he flipped through his notes, “in Mexico, I believe.”

Mr. Bellamy did so many favors for so many people, it was easy to call some in. So, on short notice, he sent a colleague with official looking credentials as a fraud investigator, and an off duty police detective, who told Duke he was there to gather notes on ‘peripheral legal

matters.’ As they reported to Mr. Bellamy, they thought their visit made a profound impression. “I suppose they were royally impressed,” is how he said it.

“There are some loose ends to tie together,” he continued, “but disposition of your mother’s final affairs should be relatively uncomplicated.” He turned his laptop so I could see the screen. His binder was open between us. “There is, was, a modest saving account, which your sister has regularly depleted over the last eight months.” He looked up at me over his reading glasses. “Haven’t checked for withdrawals in the last 24 hours. House payments are current, in the twenty-eighth year of a thirty year mortgage. The largest single asset is a savings bond that matures in five months, large enough to amortize the mortgage balance. If that’s what you want to do. When that time gets close, come see me. We’ll discuss your best interests.”

The fiasco blew up out of nowhere, then in no time, that’s where it blew back. I felt way better riding my bike from Mr. Bellamy’s place than I had in a long time. It wasn’t like I won the lottery or anything but, even if I had, I’d do the same thing. I was on my way to the auto parts store. I had two pieces of broken spark plug in the bag in my pocket, and enough money to buy a new one.

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