

Avram's Daughter

“Daddy’s lost.” Arthur pushed Becca along in her stroller. “L-l-l-lost.” He flapped his hands as he emphasized the first letter sound of the word.

“Where are we?” he crowed, then tickled his daughter’s nose, repeating his query, each time speaking in a more elevated sing-song, “Where are we?”, “Where are weeee?”

The baby giggled and cooed, answering with a long happy babble and a few rewarding “da-da”s.

Arthur smiled, paused, then sighed. He lifted his cup from the holder on the stroller handle, sipped some coffee, then placed it back and returned to pushing the stroller farther through Moriah Park.

It was the largest park in the center of their very large city. Paved paths looped around several playgrounds, sport courts, game fields, off-leash dog areas, and community gardens. These paths also wound through a network of benches, picnic tables, barbecue pits, sculptures, water fountains, and bathrooms. And everything, all of it, pivoted around a large central pond in the center of the park.

“So how can we be lost?” Arthur spoke aloud to himself this time, not to his baby. “I can understand getting lost during our first visit, even our fiftieth, but certainly not on what must be over our five hundredth.”

Arthur yawned. Isaac, Becca’s older brother, had crawled into the big bed last night. He had tried to shoo him away but his cuteness was irresistible. With Gwen away on business, it was just so warm and cuddly to have him there. But Isaac kicks in his sleep, and so Arthur had slept

poorly. His son ran out to play with his usual energy at preschool drop-off just an hour ago. As for Arthur, he yawned some more.

“Sleep is for the weak...” he scolded himself, then laughed, “...and the childless.”

“I must have taken a wrong turn somewhere near the north edge of the pond.” He suspected this because he had felt it, literally. The smooth paved path had become bumpy gravel, then finally somehow just dirt with a few stones and weeds.

Arthur heard it, or rather stopped hearing it. A sudden silence covered the usual din of babies crying, toddlers screaming, parents yelling, dogs barking, squirrels fighting, even birds tweeting. Arthur stopped and listened. Silence.

Then he looked.

He was on a dirt path along the edge of a meadow, surrounded on all sides by several rows of unusually tall trees. The trail followed straight along one edge of the field but also teed in the middle to the entrance of a very old tent. Near as Arthur could tell, the tent was made from a hemp canvas, a tan colored base material but patched with various random squares of blue and green. The shelter was held aloft as a triangle by one large wooden pole, several random stakes, and twine rope tied up to a few larger tree branches from above.

An old bald man in rags sat cross-legged on the ground beside the tent, smoking a pipe, surrounded by open cans, broken bottles and empty cardboard boxes.

“Well this sucks..” Arthur mumbled, then whispered to himself, “I hope he’s not violent.” He turned away to avoid eye contact, held his breath, and then pushed the stroller more rapidly.

Above the treetops, he could see the same blue sky and fluffy clouds of early spring as from earlier in their walk. But the meadow itself had suddenly become much darker and colder.

He was many yards past the old tent before he stopped to breathe. He inhaled and exhaled, deeply, then anxiously. He smelled the pleasant earthy scent of wet bark and the rich musk of moist soil. Then came the pungent odors of dried urine, unfiltered tobacco, cheap alcohol and woodsmoke - the stench of homelessness all too familiar to any city dweller.

Arthur winced and coughed.

Becca met his eyes, smiled, tensed her face and arched her back.

“Who’s making a poo-poo?” It was the usual face and usual posture. “Who has a poo-poo?” Arthur reached out with his index fingers as Becca grabbed them and pushed. There was a flatulent staccato, followed by the sweet rich scent of baby poo. Becca giggled after she finished, and then babbled a long set of unintelligible instructions for her father. She also pointed to the center of the meadow.

Arthur turned and saw a large flat moss covered boulder in the center of the field. “Yes, you’re right, we do need to change your poopy diaper.” He pushed the stroller off the path and onto the grass and walked towards the large rock. “Poo-poo-poopy diaper” He repeated and enunciated the first syllable in a silly sing-song pitch.

“Daddy’s not going to throw out his back again.” Arthur kissed Becca on her belly. “No he’s not. No he’s not. Especially with Mommy away on business.”

Becca laughed..

“That’s right, M-m-m-mommy made p-p-p-partner!”

Becca returned to her long babbling speech. She stumbled upon some “m” sounds which Arthur exaggerated back to her. “Mmmm. Mmmm. That’s right. Can you say Ma-ma? Mmma mmmma??”

Gwen billed more in a week than Arthur could make selling a year's worth of short stories. "Who really pays anything for fiction anymore?" Gwen had encouraged him, kindly and honestly, but also frankly. He earned far less than the cost of a nanny, so, after Isaac came, why not just become the nanny himself? "You can always write later, but kids are only cute for such a small bit of time." And thus Arthur the author became Arthur the home-dad.

"And Daddy is not just super-home-daddy this week, he's super-*solo*-home-daddy." Arthur raised his index fingers into the air as he exaggerated the syllables. "*Solo, solo, so-lo. Sooooo* we need to take it easy Becca and play it safe, okay?" He looked again towards the boulder in the meadow. "The flat top of that big stone over there will make a fine changing table for you, and a forgiving one for Daddy's back."

He pushed the stroller towards the boulder, but also steered far away from that homeless man and his tent. Arthur now heard the man alternately crying and yelling to himself. It was mostly incomprehensible, random gibberish, but with some fantastical repetitions about "serpent's breath", "life and death" and "the charm of making." Arthur did his best not to react, he looked away and pushed onwards towards the boulder ahead.

He parked the stroller next to the boulder, reached for the diaper bag beneath and hung it over his shoulder. The large rock was about waist high above the ground, and the top had a flat surface about the size of a small changing table.

Mostly flat. "Tut tut" He pursed his lips. "Now this won't do. This won't do at all." He spoke aloud to Becca as he noticed the glint of a some sort of metal object sticking out from the center of the flat top.

He looked closer. It was a sort of upside-down tee pushed flush against the stone, made of white metal with a smaller cross bar extending upwards, which was wrapped with straps of untanned leather.

Arthur placed his hand around the leather straps and gripped tightly. The exposed metal handle here was part of a much longer piece, stuck into the bed of the boulder itself. *Somebody must have hammered this into this stone. Maybe that crazy homeless guy.*

Arthur pulled at the metal with one hand, balancing his diaper bag with the other. The metal stuck at first, then loosened, then slid out and up. He held the exposed metal above his head with one hand as the diaper bag dangled down from the other. The revealed metal was no piece of rebar, nor copper pipe, but rather, of all things, a sword. Arthur was astounded. He looked up at his hand holding aloft a large broadsword.

Fluffy white clouds parted above him in the blue sky and a thick beam of sunshine poured down from above to reflect off the shaft of the sword, bouncing brightly and remarkably in every direction all at once.

Arthur admired the sword as he held it above his head, rotating it slowly. *I can lift it easily, with just one hand, and it pulls out smoothly, even from somehow having been embedded in stone.* He stared at the white blade. *Shiny and without a scratch? Some kind of special metal?*

Becca began to cry and the smell of her poop broke his trance. Another cloud drifted to block the sunbeam and the sword darkened. "Now this won't do. This won't do at all." The weapon changed. It seemed rusty and worn to him now. He tossed the old sword to the ground, then kicked it away with his feet.

Arthur placed his diaper bag upon the stone, opened it, and next removed the changing pad from inside. He unfolded it, flattening it down with both hands across the boulder's now

cleared top surface. He removed a pack of wet wipes, opened a tube of diaper cream, and unfolded a new clean disposable diaper.

"*Alley-hop!*" Arthur lifted Becca up from the stroller and lay her on her back atop the changing pad. He rolled her pants down and off, they were neither wet nor soiled, so there would be no need to change those too. He held his breath, and then, in one well practiced set of movements, he pulled open the Velcro tabs of Becca's present dirty diaper, unfolded it downward, lifted her legs upwards, wiped her clean from front to back, folded up the dirty diaper into a tight ball, lathered a dab of diaper cream into the folds of Becca's buttocks, lifted her hips slightly, slid the new clean disposable diaper underneath her bottom, folded the front side up and over, finally fastening the tabs snugly but not too tightly. Dirty diaper off, clean diaper on, Arthur exhaled, then rolled back up Becca's elastic baby pants.

Becca gurgled and smiled. "*Alley-hop encore!*" Arthur lifted her up into the air and held her high above him. Her shirt untucked and so Arthur tickled her belly with a big sloppy kiss. He then lowered his daughter back into her stroller, tucked her shirt down beneath her pants, and restrapped her into the seat. He placed both the diaper bag and the dirty diaper ball under the stroller.

Then he saw him.

Arthur's heart raced. Directly facing both him and the stroller, there on the ground just a few feet forwards, the homeless old man posed rigidly in a long low bow. His head was bent down and his forehead was touching the ground. His arms stretched forward, cradling the old sword across them like an offering.

“He who draws the sword from the stone, he shall be king.” The voice was raspy, and had an English accent. “We are unworthy, the land bleeds, the people suffer, we have sinned. But you - you found the grace to draw the sword and be king.”

Arthur remained silent. The old man became silent. They stood there, still, until Becca dropped one of her lovies, a fluffy pink kitten, onto the ground between them. “Look, sir, please, you are blocking our way. Please let us move on.” Arthur kneeled down slowly and retrieved the stuffed animal.

“He who draws the sword from the stone, he shall be king.” The old man mumbled over and over again, several more times, still holding his pose.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to remove it. I needed the space on top of the stone in order to change my daughter’s diaper. Forgive me.” Arthur moved between his daughter’s stroller and the bowing man.

The old man turned up his head and met Arthur’s gaze. He was bald with a long gray beard. “But you drew the sword from the stone?” He wore one long tattered brown robe and his feet were bound in open leather sandals. “The future has found root in the present. It is done, my lord. You - you are King.” The old man left the sword there at Arthur’s feet, then used the wooden staff by his side to lift himself upwards into a standing position. He smiled and announced to the sky, “We have our king - you are our king - thanks be to God!”

Arthur froze and paused, “Is this some sort of joke?” He bent down slowly. “My first name is Arthur and I’ve been teased about this my whole life.” He lifted the sword in his hand as much to keep it away from this crazy old homeless man as to inspect it for himself. “I suppose this is Excalibur?” He slashed twice in the air and then pointed the blade tip at the old man, “And then you must be Merlin?”

“Well yes, I am the Merlin.” The old man blinked his eyes and they turned from brown to blood red then back to brown again, startling Arthur. “Do not be afraid.” He gently tapped the sword hilt with the tip of his wooden staff. “This gift is a blessing. Not just to you, but to all of us, to all peoples, to all lands. A blessing.”

“A blessing?” Arthur grabbed the hilt with both hands this time, then raised the weapon above his head again. He swung the weapon around his head, then his waist, in a wide circle. He placed his legs in a fighting stance and parried an imaginary opponent. Sunlight descended upon him then as he twirled and pirouetted in the meadow. Arthur felt young, and fit, and free.

The old man smiled. “You see, the sword is a blessing.”

Arthur heard a sudden crack, then felt a rip. Sharp pain exploded across his lower back. “My back!” He quickly dug the tip of the sword into the dirt path. He held himself aloft with one hand leaning on the hilt, while pressing his other hand against his back as he stooped over. “Shit, I pulled my back again.” He slowly pushed himself upright, then balanced both hands on the sword hilt to hold himself in place. His breathing quickened from the pain.

Arthur frowned, “No, the sword is a curse.” He pointed to the sword, then the old man, then scolded at both of them, “Where were you?!? Where have you been? What good is it to me that you’re both here now?” His eyes watered from his back pain. “Where were you twenty years ago?! Or even ten?!” He was crying now, and yelling. “Where were you when I was young and strong? Ready and willing, eager and free?” He continued bracing himself on the sword hilt with one hand while wagging the index finger on his other hand at the old man. “Where were you when I was still brave, and begging for adventure!”

He removed a handkerchief with his free hand from his back pocket. "Now I have a wife and two children, a mortgage and life insurance." He dried his eyes and blew his nose, then pushed the handkerchief back.

"How dare you come to me now, when I am this?" He lifted up the bottom of his stained sweatshirt and pinched his large folds of belly fat. "And this!" He took his free hand and flapped at his dangling second chin. "And this!" Arthur moved his free hand to pull at the strands of thin gray hair on top of his head. "This was once brown and lush and beautiful!" His hair had thinned and grayed - from sleepless nights, from stressful days, from the endless labors of caring for his family. Arthur finished by pointing at his opponent, "How dare you - how dare you come now. I wish you had never come."

The old man gave a curt bow, then began a reply, "My king, please listen -"

"No, you listen!" Arthur interrupted. "This is my call to adventure, isn't it? My hero's call." Arthur stopped leaning on the sword, stood up, and dropped the sword back down to the ground between them. "Well I don't accept it. I reject it. I deny it."

The blade hit a rock on the path and a loud clang rang out across the meadow.

Merlin scowled. "What's this? What's this! I never saw this!" The sword rested there now on the ground between them. "You can't refuse!" The old man leaned on his staff and began a step forward.

"Stay back!" Arthur raised both his hands and folded the palms forwards. "I don't want to be king. And I don't have to wield that thing just because I drew it from the stone." Arthur spoke loudly and boldly, but he was filled with a quiet uncertainty. It was unclear to him now who was crazier - he or the old homeless man - and who might be more violent.

Arthur tried taking a step back. "My wife lives and breathes contract law and I've signed my share of writer's contracts." Both he and his daughter were pinned, with the old man in front of them, and the boulder behind them. "This contract of yours, it's 'unenforceable'. I was never presented with your 'terms' before I acquired the 'product' - the sword - I just drew it from the stone because it was in my way, not because I wanted it." Arthur emphasized his nervous legalese with finger air quotes. "A person can't be 'involuntarily bound' to a contract."

"But you misunderstand me, my king. The sword is not a contract, it is a gift." Merlin, *the* Merlin, or was it the old homeless man - Arthur was getting confused - he tapped the sword hilt with the tip of his wooden staff.

Arthur replied measuredly, "Gifts can be refused. I renounce it. I don't want it. I can't -"

Becca interrupted the argument with a loud repetitive "Ba ba, ba-ba, ba-ba..." She held her stuffed pink kitty tightly with her left arm, as she started tapping her right hand to her mouth. "Ba-ba, ba-ba, ba-ba..."

Bottle. Arthur hissed from his back pain as he kneeled to the basket below the stroller to retrieve Becca's baby bottle. He pressed the nipple into her mouth as she balanced it by the base against her right arm. She kept her kitty held tightly in her left arm, and suckled, staring upwards at the clouds above

"Listen. I'm no hero, I'm just a dad." Arthur kneeled down, grabbed the hilt of the sword with both hands. "You've got the wrong Arthur. I'm just plain Arthur Avram. I can't be your king, or even a knight. There's nothing grand or heroic about me."

He placed the tip of the blade into the dirt path and leaned gently forward upon the hilt. "Our world doesn't need more kings and warriors, it just needs newness. New stories, not old legends. After

my children were born, I realized it's my job - no, not just my job, but also my duty - to grow old, and then to die - to make way for newness in our world."

Arthur felt as if he were stuck in a dream arguing with himself. "I'm a home dad. We're a different breed of men from any generation before us. I never saw my father change a diaper, or even hold a baby, let alone cook a meal, shop, or clean a dish. Men who change diapers change the world." He rested both his hands on the back of Becca's stroller. "Times are different now. *The Hero's Journey* is a Fool's Errand - Joseph Campbell never changed a dirty diaper."

As Becca finished her bottle, Arthur took it from her. He tossed it into the basket beneath the stroller, then removed a large burp rag which he placed like a breast plate over his chest and shoulders. "I don't want to be king. Why would I want a kingdom when I have all the kingdom I need right here in my hands, and with her older brother too, and with their mommy, my wife." Arthur lifted up Becca, chest to chest, and placed her head over his shoulder, then tapped her back softly to burp her. "She is my kingdom, right here, my 'Becca', my *Ba-kol* as my parents would say, it means my 'everything'." Becca burped several times, then regurgitated some gooey white spit-up onto the rag. She closed her eyes and rested softly on Arthur's shoulder. He kept tapping her back softly and slowly swayed his torso side to side. "She's my princess. Her older brother, my prince. And their mom, my queen."

The Merlin stood tall, growing somehow taller. "And you, you are *MY* king. *THE* king." His last word echoed softly, then loudly, against the tall trees encircling the meadow. Crows flocked upwards and squawked. Then silence.

Becca fell asleep and Arthur placed her gently back into the stroller. "Okay if I must be king then I abdicate. A king can abdicate!" He rolled up the burp rag into a ball and placed it below.

"It's not that sort of king."

“What does it mean to be king then?”

“You will be the land and the land will be you.” As the Merlin spoke, Arthur noticed blue flowers, early for spring, somehow dotting the meadow. “If you fail, the land will perish. As you thrive, the land will blossom.”

“But why?” Arthur also noticed the wizard coming closer, he kept one hand on the hilt of the sword, but now grabbed Becca's stroller with the other.

“Because you are king!” The Merlin raised his staff with both hands above his head. The sky above darkened, a sudden spring shower drizzled down, and Arthur heard a roll of thunder in the distance.

Then the showers stopped and the sky cleared as suddenly as it had all begun.

“Well, frankly,” Arthur surprised himself by laughing, “that's just stupid.” He placed both of his hands back onto the hilt of the sword. “The land, the world, it's everybody's, and we've got to protect it, not become it.” He moved in front of Becca's stroller. “We live in a democracy, not a monarchy. Being king, any king, it would be wrong.”

The old man walked in a small circle, one hand holding his staff, the other now banging at the side of his head. “I am the Merlin. I have walked my way since the beginning of time. I thought to have seen it all with my sight. But truly, I could never have seen this!” He stopped and faced Arthur. “Look at the life of this ill old man before you, my host. He is homeless, unwanted, rejected by all family and friends. He is hungry, cold, wet, filthy and poor. He fills his body with drugs he shouldn't use and scorns the medications that would heal his mind. He is gentle and generous, but also violent and selfish.”

The Merlin had the old man roll up his sleeves to show several rows of track marks on his forearms. “What good has your democracy been to this man in front of you? It's too much

freedom - the freedom *to* harm. With a monarchy comes true freedom, the freedom *from* harm.”

The old man, now as Merlin, *the* Merlin, stepped forward with his staff. “This land, these people, they bleed for lack of a king.” He banged his staff onto the ground before him. The sky above darkened. “We need a king. You are that king.” There was thunder in the distance. Merlin moved a second step closer to Arthur, with Becca in her stroller behind him. His eyes turned from brown to red. “I can take the child. She is but one child. You are needed to redeem the billions here on earth. You must heal us, protect us, unite us, all with the power of this sword, and as king.” The Merlin moved a third and final step forwards, and bent down, reaching out his hands towards Becca asleep in her stroller. “Give me the child. I will be the mother and the father of the baby. I will take the child.”

“No. NEVER!” Arthur heard himself yell. He pushed Becca’s stroller away and swung the sword to protect her. The old man stepped back and Arthur missed him, but he could not stop his momentum, his back was too weak and the pain too overwhelming. Arthur’s body turned around fully and with the recoil from this second turn, his full weight fell into the sword hilt, forcing the sword blade directly into the chest of the old man. The sword slid into the old man’s body as easily as it had slid out of the stone.

Merlin fell to the ground before Arthur, with Excalibur in his chest.

There was so much blood, bright red and oozing from the wound. “Call 911” Arthur yelled, then heard his voice echo against the tall trees surrounding the meadow. He fumbled for his phone and dialed. “Shit, no service.” He cradled the old man’s head in his arms and knelt beside him.

The Merlin, still breathing, tilted his head back, gazed at the clouds above, and whispered, "...into the spine... of the dragon..." His eyes turned briefly red, back to brown, then fluttered and fixed upwards.

Arthur slapped the old man's face, no response, then he lowered his ear to the old man's chest. "No heartbeat. Oh no, oh no, oh fuck no."

The man had stopped breathing. The Merlin, however, forced the old homeless man's mouth to speak one last whisper, "*Anál nathrach, orth' bháis's bethad, do chél dénmha.*" Becca awoke from her nap to somehow precisely recite the same strange words, "*Anál nathrach, orth' bháis's bethad, do chél dénmha.*" Then Arthur heard the words swirl in the winds around him, then echoing out against the tall trees surrounding the meadow, finally dissipating upwards into the sky.

Arthur's heart was racing and his breath was sputtering. He smelled poop, but not the distinct odor of Becca's. The old man lay before him dead, having shitted himself. Arthur's response was immediate and involuntary. He rolled over and vomited. *My life is over. Gwen, Isaac, Becca, what will we do?* He lay there for a moment, as blood, vomit and tears all soaked into his favorite large blue sweatshirt. But he was a home-dad and so this shirt was already well-stained with all three - also with snot, spit, grass, urine and of course poop. No one would notice any new stains, certainly not Arthur.

This is when the forgetting began.

Arthur rolled back and Merlin's dead body had vanished. Or had it been an old homeless man? Or nobody at all? Or all three at once, as in a dream. Arthur was so confused.

The sword however still lay there upon the ground, surprisingly clean, shining beneath the sunlight, no blood upon it. Arthur lifted it with one hand as he slowly stood up. What was he holding? Was it a sword, a piece of rebar, a copper pipe? Or again, somehow all three at once...

Arthur was stunned, and the memory of what had just happened was somehow continuing to fade rapidly. He held the sword - or whatever it was - in one hand as he pushed Becca's stroller with the other.

The dirt path along the side of the meadow led out from the circle of unusually tall trees, it connected to a gravel path which connected to an empty paved path along the north edge of the pond. Arthur stopped and listened. In the distance, he heard a small dog yapping and a parent yelling at her child. He lifted the sword above his head, then flung it out above the pond water. He forgot the sword the moment it left his hand.

Arthur turned away.

If he had turned back to see it, Arthur would have seen a lady's arm rise from the lake to catch the sword he had thrown, then hold it briefly above the waters, before descending with it beneath the surface.

Arthur however had turned away. He pushed Becca's stroller now, with both hands, southward, as he regained his bearings. "You know Becca, I never realized it before, but it's not really a big pond here in the center of our park, it's more like a small lake."

Arthur was no longer lost. He had found himself. He knew where he was and where he had to go.

They neared their favorite set of baby swings. He stopped the stroller to take a long sip from his coffee cup.

“Lake.” He repeated the word to his daughter in a playful sing-song. “Lake. Can you say lake?” Then he emphasized the first letter sound of the word “L-l-l-lake.”

He lifted Becca up with both arms and placed her into the swing.