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The Poet, the Prince, and the Prophet

The Poet, the Prince, and the Prophet

by

Mathew Block

It was Saturday morning, 8:00 a.m. A red dawn stretched endlessly across the sky, and the sailors down at the local wharf—true to the old aphorism—“took warning.” The little town was silent, save at the fast-food diner. There, as they had every Saturday since time long forgotten—there the madmen held counsel.

There were three in the party, jokingly nicknamed the Poet, the Prince, and the Prophet by the townspeople. It was common knowledge that none of the three was quite sane. “But,” the waitress who saw them week in and week out would say, “they’re harmless enough when it comes down to it.” That was the general assessment—utterly mad, but nice enough as far as mad people go.

They were at their usual table this morning, and while the Poet and the Prince were in good spirits, the Prophet was unusually quiet. “Today,” he muttered to himself, crumbs infesting his scraggly beard. A crow passed in front of the window; the Prophet watched it circle once and then travel out of sight. He shuddered, and took another bite of the greasy burger. “*Today*,” he said again, drawing his friends’ attention this time. “The signs are clear.”

The Prince focused his narrow eyes upon his companion. “Is it so?” The Prophet nodded slowly. “That I should have lived to see such dark times...” the Prince trailed off. Addressing himself to the Poet, he continued more firm of voice. “It’s good you are here. The story will need telling.”

“Oh, I have words,” the Poet sighed. “But are they the right words? It’s very hard, sometimes, to tell the right ones from the wrong ones. They look so alike, you see.” He sipped on his straw. The sound of sucking air filled the restaurant for a few seconds.

The Prince nodded. “Dark times,” he said simply. “Dark times.” They were silent then for a minute and a half.

The waitress interrupted them. “Hi guys,” she said. “Can I get you anything else?” She motioned with the pen in her hand towards an empty mug before the Prince. “More coffee?”

The Prince smiled sadly. “No,” he said. “We must be going.”

“Must we?” the Poet exclaimed.

“We *must*,” said the Prophet. “We have no choice.”

The Prince put some money on the table—he knew the cost by heart—and the three rose together. “Bye,” said the waitress as she gathered up the plates.

They were nearly to the door when the Poet turned and surveyed the empty restaurant. “Good bye,” he whispered. His friends paused. “Will you remember us?” he murmured. “Will you remember the three who stood here, swords bared?” He held aloft the straw he had saved from the garbage. “Will you erect some monument in our name? Will children not yet born stare in awe, peek in wonder from behind their mother’s skirt while their father proclaims: ‘Here they sat! Here they laid the stones of our salvation.’” He wiped the tears from his eyes on his soiled sleeve.

“Will you remember us?” he asked again. “Or are we already forgotten?”

The Prince wrapped an arm around him. “Maybe,” he said, “it’s not so much about whether the poem is remembered. Maybe it’s enough that the poem was read aloud at all, enough that it sundered the silence once with peals of thunder.”

The Poet looked up into the face of his friend. The Prince kissed him on each cheek.

The Prophet spoke. “God, at least,” he remarked, “shall remember.”

“Let us go then,” said the Poet, voice wavering.

“Yes, let us go,” said the Prince.

* * * *

They journeyed from there down back

alleys, utterly silent. They were nearing the docks when the Prophet motioned the others to stop. A crow, scavenging in a dumpster, looked up. It fluttered its wings, rose on the air, and landed a few feet in front of them. It watched them with a quizzical, expectant look.

The Prophet took a step forward and bowed his head. “Speak, for your servant is listening,” he said.

The crow cawed a high-screeching caw. The Prophet trembled visibly and moaned.

“What is it?” cried the Prince. All at once a great wind rushed in. The Prince’s dirty cap was taken from his bald head. The Poet shrieked and fell on his face. Trash from the dumpster flew up and around them, pelting them with tin cans and newspapers, pizza crusts and lemon rinds. But the Prophet and the crow did not move.

As suddenly as the wind began, it died. Slowly the crow spread its wings and took flight. The Poet and the Prince rushed to the Prophet.

“What is it?” the Prince asked again.

The Prophet licked his chapped lips. “It is as I foretold: today is the day of destiny.”

“You mean...” began the Prince.

The Prophet took a deep breath, then another. “Yes,” he said at last. “That ancient serpent is on his way. He rises against this place even now.”

The Poet whimpered. “Take courage, friend,” the Prophet smiled a weak smile, revealing two missing front teeth. “God has sent us his angel to strengthen us. Did you not feel his Spirit among us even now?”

“Would that he would send us salvation,” the Poet breathed.

“He has sent us ourselves,” said the Prince. “That is enough.”

* * * *

About 3:00 p.m. the sky grew black. “You boys best be headed home,” an elderly lady called to them from her porch. “There's a big storm coming this way. Just heard it on the radio.”

“Yes,” the Poet said, his voice high and attenuated. “We are heading home. Our journeys are nearly at an end, and we have grown old so young.”

“That's nice, dear,” said the old woman, not really listening. Shortly she disappeared back inside and the door closed.

They continued walking and were soon at the harbour. The boats were firmly fastened, but the waves—so violent had they grown—still rocked the boats dangerously against the docks. The madmen walked out onto the longest pier. Lightning broke the sky and a sea-swell rose up over them, soaking them to the bone.

“Men!” cried the Prince when the thunder died. “It is for this moment that we have been born. Satan falls upon this city, and we, we three alone, can prevent his victory.” He clasped hands with the Prophet and the Poet. “It has been my greatest honour to lead you these many years. It is my dying pleasure to lead you now in this final battle.”

The thunder cracked beside them. The Poet stumbled but the Prophet caught him. The Prince pulled a broken plastic tiara from his pocket and placed it upon his head. It did not blow away though the winds shrieked

about them. Then he took a Swiss Army knife from another pocket in the old coat and flicked it open. The heavens split and the rain roared down.

“Prepare yourselves,” shouted the Prince to his companions. The lightning cracked again, dancing just above their heads. The Poet pulled out a chewed pencil. “Have you nothing else?” asked the Prince.

“My tongue and my pen have ever been my weapons,” cried the Poet, his face illumined by the fire in the sky. “I'll be damned if I rely on anything else!”

“But against the forces of hell?” the Prince questioned.

“There are two things the Son of Perdition hates,” the Poet spat. “The first is beauty. The second is truth. I intend to give him both in equal measure.”

The Prince smiled a tired smile. “And you, my friend?” he asked the Prophet.

The Prophet undid the twine holding up his pants. He unfastened the buttons of his jack shirt and let it fall into the raging sea. So too he removed his shoes, his socks, and his tattered underwear, until at last he stood naked in the storm. It was hailing now.

He turned to the Prince. “Your domain has ever been that of the earthly realm. You,” he addressed the Poet now, “have been given authority over the heart. But I...” he was interrupted as lightning struck the mast of a sailboat forty feet away. It erupted into flame.

“But I,” he shouted again defiantly. “I have been given the gift of reliance—of trust in a God greater than I. And it is on his strength I shall rely in these final moments, not my own.”

A howl above the din of the storm broke

forth. "It is time!" the Prince cried, clutching his knife.

A twisting black mass appeared before them, and in the midst of it a great screaming face of shifting shadows.

Somewhere far off a crow cawed.

"For God and man!" roared the Prince. And the three leaped into the swirling vortex.

* * * *

It was Saturday morning, 8:00 a.m., a few weeks later. The weather was clear and all the fishing boats were out on the water. The little port-community was silent, save at the fast-food place near the edge of town. There a truck driver, passing through, had stopped for some breakfast.

"Can I get you anything else?" the waitress asked. The truck driver put down the newspaper he had been reading.

"No, I think I'm fine," he replied, wiping his face with a napkin.

The waitress motioned to the newspaper on the table. The front page read: "Waterspout kills three, bodies recovered."

"Real sad about that," she said. "They used to come in here every week around this time."

"Hmm," the driver nodded, very little interest evident in his voice."

"The funeral's scheduled for this afternoon at St. Mike's," she continued. "I'm hoping it'll be quiet enough around here to go."

A crow fluttered by the window, and the driver put down his paper. "Why were they out on the water?" he asked at last.

"No one's sure," she said as she cleared the dishes. "They weren't exactly sane, of course, so that probably had something to do with it." She paused. "Real sad," she said at last "Utterly mad, but nice enough as far as mad people go."