

Mr. K's Decision

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Cover by Iana Cazacenco

To Davis, Billie-Jazz, and Joss.

*You are my blood and my flesh.
I'd instead burn in hell forever than renounce
your affection for a single moment.*

To Ma 'a, with all my love and affection.

4:12 p.m.

"Mine also has undergone a heart operation—she's had a pacemaker implanted," said Mr. K, an elegant man in his early fifties. Then, pointing impassively at his cell phone, he went on in an almost soliloquizing tone. "But should someone call me now to announce her death, I wouldn't even blink, let alone attend her funeral."

His voice was calm. Flowing from the casual conversation, the words summing up his thought had risen from the depths of his consciousness, not unlike a whale's back appearing and disappearing in the open sea.

People at the table smiled indulgently. They knew his facetious character, especially in the afterglow of a formal meal like this one.

Settled in Long Island, New York, the Tiffany Estate ballroom exhaled a subtle scent of well-being. Fragrances of finespun leather and expensive perfumes enjoyed a peaceful polygamous marriage with the aromas of drinks. Lulled by the soft background music, the guests had slowly formed groups aligning with their affinities. Glasses met delicately. Good manners were on display. Gleaming looks, friendly mischievousness, and the usual social etiquette that befits a sumptuous venue filled the atmosphere. Crossing voices, bursting laughter, and even the most enthusiastic discussions about Barack Obama's presidential record were muffled.

"I wager she's been rejoicing with angels for a while now," ventured Chris Calmann, a TV host, with a cheerful voice. "Therefore, you've already buried her. I almost got fooled. Nice try though!"

"Well, bet lost!" replied Mr. K in a thoughtful mood. "Although morbidly alone with her remaining time on this earth, she is still alive...somewhere in Paris. But, for me, she doesn't exist anymore. In a way, you're right: I have already entombed her deep underground."

Mr. K usually stood out as a brilliant and provocative character but, the tone of those words—poised, monotonous, and free from any intemperate influence—invited a puzzled expression on some faces. After a moment of wonder, the slight hilarity that floated in the air dwindled. The absence of jest became clear to the people staring at him, their visages clouded with interrogative indignation. Some even showed instinctive distrust, perfectly perceptible in their sudden retreat.

"So, if your mother died, you would not bury her. You would not pay her one last tribute. Is that your claim?" Mr. Calmann asked in amazement.

Fingering his mustache, Mr. K confirmed conscientiously with a nod. "I've become allergic to her," he stated. "Even an accidental glance to her corpse might induce in me not only nausea but also a burst of not so affectionate feelings, so to speak. I don't want to deal with that specter or contemplate her remains as a subject of disgust. I unlearned to carry her in my heart; so, carrying her coffin..."

"Oh!" moaned his interlocutors.

They straightened their postures and peered uneasily at each other as if to validate what their ears had heard. The gentleman had spoken with such gravity that his friends disapproved and proceeded to lecture him.

“I reproach myself for shocking you,” Mr. K apologized. “But out of respect for society, for decency, for myself, and particularly out of consideration for mothers, the real and worthy ones, I can think of no greater ultimate tribute to mine than to avoid vomiting on her corpse.”

A wave of dissent was triggered by his remark and the crowd of attendees assaulted him with variations of ‘How dare you!’ and ‘How can you refer to the author of your life so coldly?’

The censure escalated passionately, feeding on itself with increased virulence, and consuming all other surrounding conversations. Soon, the small group behind the tumult grew to include the rest of the two hundred guests.

This heterogeneous assembly consisted of business tycoons, United Nations diplomats, members of the International Organization of the Francophonie, and some figures without a known pedigree. They had often met on other official occasions that commend maintaining a social standing and simultaneously extricating oneself from formalism.

The caustic comments multiplied, and it was no longer possible to distinguish legitimate outrage from timely hostility. Now, Mr. K’s presence was an insult to the decorum, as evidenced by the disdainful faces studying him.

Then, Martha Parson, a philanthropist with a head of graying hair, whose charm must have served as a romantic weapon in her youth, filled the hollow of the unexpected lull.

“How can one imagine not accompanying to her ultimate resting place the person from whom one received life?”

With a sweet voice, despite the reproving fury lurking in its tremor, she had questioned no one in particular, but her eyes fell on Mr. K. He smiled incompletely. Until then, he had silently taken blows from everyone with majestic patience. This query seemed to unite the gazing assembly. He slowly crossed his legs and furrowed his brow.

“She gave me life, no question,” he admitted, addressing the elderly woman. “But, in case you’d count this aspect as a sufficient argument, I’d object I never asked for it.”

A storm of disfavor electrified the atmosphere.

“She’s the one who breastfed you!” shouted Chuck Beecham, a man of solid build, making a list on his fingers. “She cared and sacrificed much for you, as all mothers do! She cooked your favorite childhood dishes as no one will ever do, not even your wife! She’s also the one who knows you and what you treasure. Do all these realizations present so little importance to your conscience that you don’t feel indebted to your mother?”

“Contrary to what you think,” Mr. K replied, “I value them greatly. You’d be grossly mistaken to ascribe any filial ingratitude to me.”

“So, I should have asked ‘why’ instead of ‘how’,” corrected Mrs. Parson.

Mr. K smiled again. “What explanation did you expect?”

She smiled back at him with sorrowful grace and intended to speak when several sharp voices rang through the room.

“Frank, direct, and transient!” the leading one yelled. “That’s the kind of justification we would like to hear!”

Mr. K allowed himself a few seconds of contemplation. Eyes half-closed, he seemed to examine mentally the vagaries of a process. He then nodded with an indefinable air of concern and smiled at the verdict of his thoughts.

“Should I answer with four or five sentences, you’d all dismiss me instantly.”

“Why would you think that?” questioned Mrs. Parson.

“My basis would carry some sort of emptiness due to the briefness of my response, and you’d forget to push for an elaboration. Yet, my decision results from events whose importance only blooms if you weigh them with hindsight, establish the connection between them, and read the curve they draw. A laconic answer would only distort your assessment, not to mention your judgment. No, no, it would be better to remain silent than minimize the facts.”

Mr. Beecham shrugged with a gesture of contempt. “I see nothing that could justify such an ugly decision. Why don’t you just capsule whatever you deem important?”

“Summaries and shortcuts vandalize reality so cruelly,” Mr. K observed, uncrossing and recrossing his legs. “I don’t want to find myself in the company of those high-flying liars who continually distort the truth by stripping it of its history, context, and all its key elements. An iris becomes a simple black dot in their mouth.” A resigned expression settled on his face. “This subject exemplifies those for which I prefer to abandon myself to stoning rather than omitting their genesis.”

The table shook slightly with thud of his fist as he concluded. A silence fell upon the room and lingered as the guests glanced at each other, searching for a common understanding.

“Well, I don’t mean to hurt your feelings, sir, but let me confess one thing,” Mrs. Parson said in impatient incredulity. “I don’t care what you base your decision on. I smell a scent of personal vendetta that my mind will never take. That said, I’m willing to look at the origin of your ridiculous notion.”

The assembly assented to her words with various grunts and definitive nods of agreement. Their eyes, sparkling with curiosity, seemed to sign a blank check to Mr. K. He sniffed his glass, sipped his cognac thoughtfully, and immersed his mind in the past.