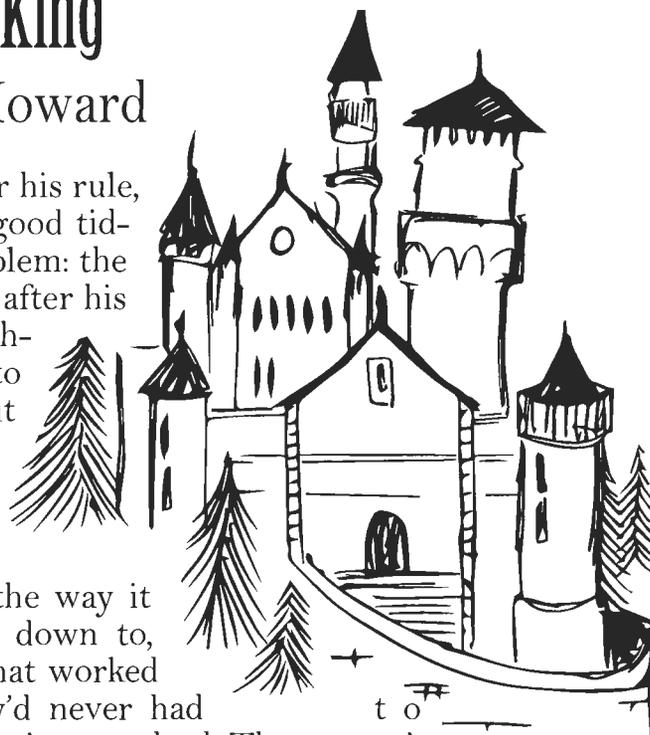


# The Good King

by Raley Howard

There once was a very good king. Under his rule, wars were won and famines were ended and good tidings came to the land. There was just one problem: the king didn't have an heir. His wife died shortly after his coronation, and before he could have taken another, war started, and then there was a country to run, so that by the time things settled down, it was almost too late. But you can't have a kingdom without a leader, and to have a leader the king must have an heir.

Up to this point, rule had been passed down from father to son, and that was just the way it worked. But now there was no son to pass down to, and no hope for a son either. So the council that worked with the king was in a bit of a bind. They'd never had deal with something like this before. There wasn't a standard. There wasn't a set way to go about handling this. So, since there wasn't an heir announced, and it was nearing the time for an heir to start being trained, there was a lot of dissension in the kingdom. It seemed to the public that the very title to the throne would soon be up for grabs. Since they would need an heir, it felt like everyone's son had the potential to be the next king, so people were throwing out their sons' names left and right, vying for the position.



Once a year, every year, the king makes a journey around the villages. He visits every single one, even the outlying ones that aren't technically connected to the kingdom but are still governed by his rule. He and a small number of knights make the journey on horses, and it takes a long time.

So he sets out. While he's out, his council, who are monitoring the kingdom in his stead, decides that while he's gone they'll handle this heir problem. They'll find a couple of good ones, and then let the king make the final choice so he'll feel like he was a part of it. They don't tell him what they're planning—they just do it. So, while the cat is away the mice will play, and while the king's gone his administrators hold a sort of Heir Ball. Basically they just accept all applications for Heir Apparent and try to determine the best one.

In another place, in one of the outlying villages, there's a boy. This boy is an orphan. If he's not an orphan, then his parents disowned him, so he might as well be one. He doesn't have much memory of his life; it's really hazy, so if he had parents, he doesn't remember them anyway. He's an orphan. He's in a particular outlying village that's really far away from the kingdom, so far out that it's hard for the guards, who

normally patrol the villages periodically, to get to, so they've just kind of left this village to tend to itself. And the village has done just fine on its own, but that's meant that the boy has just gone unnoticed. The mayor of the village doesn't want to deal with the boy, the villagers don't want to deal with him; they just want to pretend he doesn't exist. And because of that, no one's helped him. He just lives on the streets. He doesn't have a home. He wanders around, without enough food, and whatever food he does eat, he has to steal. The only time the villagers talk to him is to yell at him for stealing their food. No one will give him a place to stay. Everyone wants to pretend he doesn't exist. He's been sleeping with the pigs, stealing their slop. He is the village trash. They can't make him leave, but they're not going to do anything to make him stay. He's not that old—ten, eleven maybe. He doesn't even know his own name. He's just there. Their dirty laundry. He's the thing they don't want anyone to know about. The thing they don't want to talk about.

So there's the boy.

Now the king is on his journey around the villages. He does this mostly to affirm support for himself. The villagers can get to know him, he can see them, and it allows for a tangible connection between these villages, which don't normally participate in kingdom matters, to the kingdom itself. Keep them loyal, make sure they're doing the right stuff, that sort of thing.

So the king goes around to the villages, and it takes weeks to do this. Finally he makes it to this one village that's really out of the way. The past couple of years, storms have blown up and blocked the pathway to the village. There's only one way in and one way out so it's been a couple years since they've come, and the villagers have assumed that the king has forgotten about them. Normally villages prepare for months in advance and save all their best food—especially meat, which is always scarce—for the king's arrival. The setup is that when a king comes to a village, he's given a tour, and then there's a big feast in the middle of town and everyone in the village comes. But this village thought they'd been forgotten, they didn't think the king would ever come—it'd been so long. So when the king does show up, needless to say they're surprised. They weren't expecting him. They don't have anything prepared. But this king is a very good king, and he tells them he's been eating fine food for quite a while, and his stomach is about sick of it. He would do just fine with some vegetables and maybe a little soup. And the villages always have soup and vegetables on hand so they're able to hold a feast after all. The whole village comes together, washes their vegetables and brings them out. They set up rows and rows of tables, pulling tables and chairs out of people's houses, lining the streets with tables, piling the tables with food. Everyone comes together: not one seat is empty. There's a place for every person in the village, including the king and his staff. They eat a wonderful meal, way more than any of the villagers ever eat at a time, or maybe even in a week. After they finish eating, there's a party—a huge festival. There's music and dancing and just general cheer.



At some point during the party the king wanders away a little bit, just kind of scoping out the town, and he hears a noise. It's a noise he hasn't heard in a very long time, especially today when everyone's celebrating. He hears crying. And he thinks one of the village kids wandered off and got hurt, so he goes to investigate, and what he finds uproots him. He sees a boy in a pigsty, crying as he fights a pig for its slop. The king can't believe it. Just an hour ago he was stuffing his face. There was more food at the feast than anyone had seen in a long time. There were no empty seats at the table. And here was this boy fighting a pig for slop.

And the king knows. He knows why the boy's crying, because he can hear the music from here, and he can smell the food. And he knows that this boy knows there was a party where every single person in the village was invited, and he wasn't. Then the boy looks up, slop dripping off his face, and there's a look in his eyes that the king recognizes. It's a look the king's only seen a few times. It's the kind of look that the boys get—the boys, not quite old enough to be men yet, but just old enough to bear the responsibility of a sword, straightening their helmets, lacing up their boots. The look they get when they're about to go to war and they know they could die, that they might never come back, that this might be the end. That look of pure terror. And that's the look this boy has as he looks at the king. And the king steps towards him and the boy panics. He barrels backward, bangs into the fence, and he's panicking, trying to get the king to stop. The boy pleads with him, muttering, "no, no, it's not clean, it's not clean." Because this is the king and even his travel attire is extravagant, but he's not even just wearing his travel attire—this is his travel *party* attire because travel attire is what you wear when the roads might get dusty, but these are finer robes that he wears for the celebrations and the parties that he has while he's traveling. And this boy, he's covered in slop, and he's wearing clothes that are all torn up, clothes that he's probably been wearing for a very long time, and this boy is freaking out because he's afraid the king will get dirty.

And the king keeps going. He doesn't stop.

The boy keeps saying “no,” whimpering. He covers his head with his hands, drops to his knees, kneels down cowering. Because you can imagine the only contact he’s had with anyone, much less someone dressed as nice as the king, had to have been bad and could only have ended in yelling and punching. And the king goes to him and the boy covers his head and you know he’s just waiting for a kick or a punch or yelling, but he’s stunned and surprised and doesn’t quite know what to think when he feels arms wrap around him. And the king uncovers the boy’s face and takes his robes, his nice robes that are already kind of dirty from traipsing through the pigsty, and wipes the boy’s face, and wipes the boy’s hands. And then he stands up and pulls the boy up with him. And the boy is still hiccuping, sadness to panic to confusion, hiccuping, tears silently streaming down his face. And the king takes off his cape and wraps it around the boy’s shoulders. He tells him, “Peace, my son. You’re going to be all right now.” You can imagine again that this boy has never heard words that gentle before, definitely not aimed at him. And the king wraps his arm around the boy’s shoulder, the boy no more than ten or eleven, and he leads the boy out of the pigsty and back to the center of the village where all the villagers are gathered.

When the king walks up, the revelry, the noise, the music, the dancing, the laughing, everything just stops. And everyone stares. Because here’s this king who’s now dirty, and this boy who has been living in a pigsty. And one of the king’s attendants comes up to him and asks if the king’s okay, what happened? The attendant totally ignores the boy, just focused on the king. The king looks around and knows what happened, he knows that this boy is this village’s dark secret. But he’s a wise king. He turns to his attendant and says, “Go to the kitchen and gather up the best of everything that’s left, the best you can find, and bring it back here because we have been having a feast, but the guest of honour has just arrived.” And the attendant goes off, and the king looks down at the boy who’s trembling, feeling the weight of the entire village’s stares on him. And the king bends down in front of the boy, so that he’s blocking the boy’s view of the people, and he asks the boy his name. But the boy doesn’t know. For as long as he can remember he hasn’t had a name. He doesn’t know if he was ever given one. And the king looks at him and he says, “Then today is a special day, because today you shall receive a name.” And the king stands up and leads the boy over to the table, and sets him down in the king’s own chair at the head—the plushest, softest, and most comfortable chair the town could find—just as the attendant comes back with a plate piled high with the best food. But the boy just stares at the plate—the villagers—the king—the plate—never having been given something like this without a price, so the king sits down in one of the less-comfy chairs next to the boy and pushes the plate toward him. “Eat.” And the boy does.