

The Saddest Word in the World

by Michael Channing

There once was a king who loved to dive into the river of metaphor and let the wild current drag him drenched and gasping out to sea. While others could stand satisfied with jolly dances or light opera, poems of love and plays that jigged around the bed post and ended in the wedding chapel, this particular king longed to be moved to tears by the literature he read and the dramas he attended. For him, the best plays were the saddest plays, and the greatest of poems were those that whispered melancholy into his bones like the sharpest Autumn wind.

One day the king sent notice throughout his kingdom that he would give a thousand gold coins to the one who could name for him the saddest single word in the world. On the day of the contest, the wisest men and the greatest writers, the most skilled bards and dramatists, gathered in the throne room to test their talents. None who made their living with words, either written or spoken or sung, could pass on the competition, for having to move someone to sadness with a single word was a challenge that set all their minds to thrumming. And a great number of commoners were in attendance as well, for they had long ago learned to love the sight of their king under the sway of great beauty, and a saying went around the kingdom that one of the king's tears was worth a bucket of rain.

The audience chamber was silent as a library, for all the writers kept quiet to themselves, as was normal for writers, but today especially because no one wanted to hint at the word he planned to speak for fear of giving it to another.

The first to try was a poet of great renown. He was not a rich poet, but he was known throughout the land as a lover of women who conquered his prey with romantic verses. "The saddest word in the world, your highness," he said and paused dramatically, "is love."

All the others nodded and murmured because they had had the same idea. None of them believed it would work, but still there was the fear that it would.

The king stroked his beard and pondered the word. "I believe I see what you have in mind. But do explain."

The poet stood tall and said, "It is a fact that there is never love without pain. For love is not always returned, and the stricken walks alone. Or some day your lover will be gone, taken by the will of the Lord or by the arms of a rival. And great sadness will fill that vacant room in your heart."

"What you say is true for some," said the king, "but not for all. I have never loved anyone but my queen, and as she is still by my side, I have not known the pain of losing her. And have you, dear poet, ever seen a lonely night or felt the slightest sting at saying goodbye to any who've warmed your bed?"

The poet knew he'd lost and went to the back of the room to stand against the wall and listen as the others made their attempts.

The second to approach was one of the king's favorite playwrights. In his plays, men went off to war, and their women wept into the clothing left behind in the wardrobes and cried again as their young sons took the faces of their fathers, for the women knew they would soon be marching off to war as well. "Undoubtedly," he said at the foot of the throne, "the saddest of all words is loss."

"That is a sad word indeed," said the king.

A smile bloomed on the playwright's face then quickly wilted.

"But not the saddest. I remember when I was a boy, my father taught me to play chess. Being only a boy, I naturally lost every game. But I strove to overcome my weakness, to learn strategy and patience, and finally I beat him. It is one of my finest memories, and it grew from the seed of losing."

The playwright nodded his understanding and stood against the back wall as the next in line spoke his word.

"Death," said an unknown poet from the edge of the kingdom, "is the most feared, and the saddest of all words."

The king dismissed this immediately. "I'm afraid you've traveled all this way for nothing. But only in death does true glory arise. How many heroes are exalted in song while they are alive? And from death come the trees and the green grass. Death in itself is a proof of life. Now had you said untimely death, you'd have something, but then that would be two words wouldn't it?"

All the other writers laughed at the fellow's folly, grateful they had not made such a mistake. But they were also indebted to

this poor man and to the two before him. They had illuminated an important lesson: Sadness was subjective, and the king, having lived a privileged life, did not know the same sorrows as everyone else.

Another took his turn, a musician with a lute on his back. "The saddest word I've ever sung, would be the number one. One is a child without parents, the last coin in the pocket of a beggar, the only star seen from the window of a cell, a leaf falling to the hard, uncaring earth."

"I see," said the king. He held up his hand to quiet the rest. They felt this singer a bit too brass for having done far more than speak a single word. Respectfully, they held their anger as the king continued. "But one is also the philosopher deep in thought, a priest in prayer, a dreamer in the clouds, and a writer plying his trade."

The singer had to nod in agreement, and he took his place with the ones who'd gone before.

The day went on, and writers spoke their sad words, and the king admitted that many were sad, but none of them were, to him, the saddest. Dread could keep a man safe, in that he is apt to avoid the things he fears. Starvation gives one a greater appreciation for the food he is able to grow or buy.

Murder was not sad, exclaimed the king. It was an angry word. Waste was a foul word, one the king could hardly stomach. And emptiness was an exciting word. It foretold of things to follow, as an empty field promises the coming crop, and an empty bed, dreams yet

to come.

Someone, perhaps in an act of desperation as the day grew long, submitted the word sadness. But the king rejected it, saying the word big was not big, nor little at all small.

The only word that gave the king pause was cold. He sat in silence for a while, and all the writers held their breath. At last the king said, "When I think of things in this world that are cold--a tyrant's heart, a loved one too soon taken by sickness, the breath of Winter--I am filled with sadness."

Everyone in attendance nodded and whispered to one another.

"Then, as I have with all your other beautiful words, I imagine the good things that can be cold--water drawn from a deep well, rain on a summer's night. And I still feel a heaviness in my heart."

The audience agreed. It was a gloomy word.

"I can find no fault in your word, young sir. But I must make a confession. Your king has not been entirely honest with you."

Gasps and questioning looks throughout the crowd. They settled to a nervous stir as the king raised his hand.

"It was my intention to allow none of you the prize. Not because I was hoarding the money, but because I wanted the glory of besting the best writers in the realm. I was going to discredit every attempt you made, and at the end of the contest I would state that I had discovered the saddest word in the world myself. And I was going to proclaim it to be everyone."

The gathered writers looked angry and insulted. They were used

to being mishandled and lied to, but this was their king, who claimed to be their loyal supporter.

"I imagined this would make me appear as gifted a wordsmith as those who have come to my halls today, but now I see that I look foolish. Will you please forgive me, my people?"

And because the king's honesty and humility were genuine, everyone did, and the king gave the young poet who'd ruined his plan the promised chest of gold, and porters brought wine, and everyone drank, then a hundred singers sang a hundred songs, and a hundred poets spoke a hundred poems, and a hundred playwrights gave a hundred speeches, and the sorrow flowed like wine, and the wine flowed like cold tears in the eyes of everyone.