

# The King of Sentences

by [Jonathan Lethem](#) December 17, 2007

This was the time when all we could talk about was sentences, sentences—nothing else stirred us. Whatever happened in those days, whatever befell our regard, Clea and I couldn't rest until it had been converted into what we told ourselves were astonishingly unprecedented and charming sentences: "Esther's cleavage is something to be noticed" or "You can't have a contemporary prison without contemporary furniture" or "I envision an art which will make criticism itself seem like a cognitive symptom, one which its sufferers define to themselves as taste but is in fact nothing of the sort" or "I said I want my eggs scrambled not destroyed." At the explosion of such a sequence from our green young lips, we'd rashly scribble it on the wall of our apartment with a filthy wax pencil, or type it twenty-five times on the same sheet of paper and then photocopy the paper twenty-five times and then slice each page into twenty-five slices on the paper cutter in the photocopy shop and then scatter the resultant six hundred and twenty-five slips of paper throughout the streets of our city, fortunes without cookies.

We worked in bookstores, the only thing to do. Nobody who didn't—and that included every one of our customers—knew what any of the volumes throbbing along those shelves was worth, not remotely. Nor did the bookstores' owners. Clea and I were custodians of a treasury of sentences much bigger on the inside than on the outside. Though we mostly handled the books only by their covers (or paged briefly through to ascertain that no dunce had striped the pages yellow or pink with a Hi-Liter), we communed deeply with them, felt certain that only we deserved to abide with them. Any minute we'd read them all cover to cover, it was surely about to happen. Meanwhile, every customer robbed us a little. At the cash registers we spoke sentences tailored to convey our disdain, in terms so subtle it was barely detectable. If our customers blinked a little at the insults we embedded in our thank-yous, we believed, they just might be worthy of the marvels their grubby dollars entitled them to bear away.

We disparaged modern and incomplete forms: gormless and garbled jargon, graffiti, advertising, text-messaging. No sentence conveyed by photons or bounced off satellites had ever come home intact. Punctuation! We knew it was holy. Every sentence we cherished was sturdy and Biblical in its form, carved somehow by hand-dragged implement or slapped onto sheets by an inky key. For sentences were sculptural, were we the only ones who understood? Sentences were bodies, too, as horny as the flesh-envelopes we wore around the house all day. Erotically enjambed in our loft bed, Clea patrolled my utterances for subject, verb, predicate, as a chef in a five-star kitchen would minister a recipe, insuring that a soufflé or sourdough would rise. A good brave sentence ("I can hardly bear your heel at my nape without roaring") might jolly Clea to instant climax. We'd rise from the bed giggling, clutching for glasses of cold water that sat in pools of their own sweat on bedside tables. The sentences had liberated our higher orgasms, nothing to sneeze at. Similarly, we were also sure that sentences of the right quality could end this hideous endless war, if only certain standards were adopted at the higher levels. They never would be. All the media trumpeted the Administration's lousy grammar.

But we were chumps and we knew it. As makers of sentences we were practically fetal, beneath notice, unlaunched, fooling around in our spare time or on somebody else's dime. Nobody loved our sentences as we loved them, and so they congealed or grew sour on our tongues. We barely glanced at our wall-scribbings for fear of what a few weeks or even hours might expose in our infatuations. Our photocopied fortune slips we'd find in muddy clogs in storm drains, tangled with advertising flyers, unheeded. Our manuscripts? Those were unspeakable secrets, kept not only from the world but from each other. My pages were shameful, occluded everywhere with xxxxxx's of regret. I scurried to read Clea's manuscript every time she left the apartment but never confessed that I even knew it existed. Her title was "*Those Young Rangers Thought Love Was a Scandal Like a Bald White Head.*" Mine was "

*I Heard the Laughter of the Sidemen from Behind Their Instruments.’*

Others might hail kings of beer or burgers—we bowed to the King of Sentences. There was just one. We owned his titles in immaculate firsts and tattered reading copies and odd variant editions. It thrilled us to see the pedestrian jacket copy and salacious cover art on his early mass-market paperbacks: to think that he’d once been considered fodder for dime-store carrousel! The newest editions of the titles he’d allowed to be reprinted (four early novels had been suppressed from republication) were splendidly austere, their jackets, from the small presses that published him now, bearing text only, no graven images. The progress of his editions on our shelf was like a cartoon of evolution, a slug crawling from the surf to become a mammal, a monkey, and then at last a hairless noble fellow gazing into the future.

The King of Sentences gave no interviews, taught nowhere, condescended to appear at no panels or symposia. His tastes, hobbies, and heartbreaks were unknown, and we extrapolated them from his books at our peril. His digital footprint was pale: people like that didn’t care about people like him. Google, for what it was worth, favored a famous painter of wildlife scenes—beaver dams, heron hideaways—with the same name. The King of Sentences only wrote, beavering away himself on a dam of quintessence, while wholly oblivious of public indifference and of a sales record by now likely descending to rungs occupied by poets. His author photograph, identical on twenty years of jackets and press clippings until it stopped circulating at all, arrested him somewhere in the mid-sixties, turtlenecked, holding a cocktail glass forever. His last cocktail, maybe.

In the same loft where we entangled, Clea and I drove ourselves mad reading the King of Sentences’ books aloud, by candlelight, when we ought to have been sleeping. We’d tear the book from each other’s hands for the pleasure of running his words like gerbils in the habitrails of our own mouths. We’d alternate chapters, pages, paragraphs, finally sentences, at last agree to read him in unison. He could practically hear us as we intoned his words, we’d swear they reached his ears. But not really. Really, we were vowing to ourselves and to each other that we’d make a day trip in search of the King of Sentences, that we’d flush him out, propel ourselves into his company and confidence, buoy him with our love and bind ourselves (and our secret manuscripts, oh yeah!) to his greatness. We each had what the other needed, of this we were positive. Maybe we’d watch him write. Maybe he’d watch us dance, or fuck, who knew? We’d buy him lunch. He was surely mortal enough for lunch. He’d want us at least for lunch.

He lived, we’d learned, north of the city, having drawn from his days as a Greenwich Village flâneur whatever inspiration he’d needed, and departed around the time of that last photograph and cocktail. (We figured that his departure from the narrow town house on Jane Street marked an expiration date on anything west of Second Avenue as an authentic locale.) Minimal detective work pinned him to a P.O. box in Hastings-on-Hudson—how clever and coy he had been to find a place-name that was itself, with the mere insertion of an apostrophe, a sentence, and a faintly lascivious one, too. So it was that we knew he’d summoned us to his hiding place: Clea could play Hudson, and I’d be Hasting.

We sent a postcard warning, addressed to his box. No return address, so he couldn’t refuse. No fancy sentences, fearing his judgment of those. Just fragments: “coming in two weeks,” “get ready,” “can’t wait to meet in person” (as if we’d already met on other planes, for we had). The appointed day came upon us like a sickness, and though each in our privacy might have preferred to stay in bed and sweat it out we couldn’t have looked each other in the eye if we hadn’t staggered out of doors, to the subway, up to Grand Central Terminal. During the short ride we held hands, fever-sweaty at the palms. Exiting Metro-North’s Hastings-on-Hudson station under a thundercloud-clotted sky, we found ourselves the sole travellers not claimed by family members waiting in Subarus or bleeping their driver-side doors unlocked as they crossed the parking lot with cell phones clammed to their ears. The train continued on behind us, and the station depopulated as if neutron-bombed.

“This is the town of the King of Sentences.”

“This little town.”

“He could be watching us now, don’t act stupid. With a telescope.”

We blundered along something called Main Street, seeking the post office, until a passerby directed us to Warburton Avenue. Inside the mediocre lobby we staked out a position near the numbered boxes, innocuously pretending to screw up our change-of-address forms so that we had to start over again a dozen times. His box, which we surveilled with peripheral vision only, pulsed with risk and possibility—our own postcard had been handled there, a precursor to this encounter.

Losing patience, we sidled to the main counter. “What time on the average day does the box holder typically, you know, pick up?”

“Box mail goes up at ten-thirty.”

“Right, sure, but mostly when do citizens appear and begin to gather it up, take it to their private homes?”

“Whenever they care to.”

“Sure, right, this is America, isn’t it?”

“Sure is.”

“Thank you.”

We resumed charades with the chained pen. Two, three, five, eight, eighteen Hastings-on-Hudsonians lumbered in to check their boxes, sort circulars into recycling bins, greet the postmistress, and trade coins for stamps, each of comically tiny denominations. Everyone in this hamlet, it seemed, had just found a sixteen- or twenty-three-cent stamp in a dusty drawer, and had chosen today to supplement it up to viability using car-seat nickels and pennies.

Yet somehow between transactions the postmistress had snuck away for a tattling phone call, or so we surmised from the blinking patrol car that now swept up in front of the P.O. Into the lobby strode a cowboyesque figure, a man, late-fiftyish, wearing a badge in the manner of a star, lean, and, when he spoke, laconic. Clea read my mind, saying, “You the sheriff in these parts?”

“Chief of Police.”

“Not the Sheriff of Hastings-on-Hudson?”

“No, ma’am, there isn’t one. Can I ask what you’re doing here?”

“Waiting.”

“Have you folks got postal business today?”

“No,” I said. “But we’ve got business with someone who might have postal business, if that’s O.K.”

“I suppose it might be, sir, but I’m forced to wonder who we’re talking about.”

“The King of Sentences.”

“I see. You wouldn’t happen to be the authors of a certain unsigned and borderline-ominous postcard?”

“Might happen to be, though there was hardly ominous intent.”

“I see. And now you’re waiting, I’m guessing, for the addressee.”

“In the manner of free Americans in a federally controlled public space, yes. We checked with the postmistress.”

“I see. You mind if I wait a bit myself?”

“By definition we can’t.”

Soon enough he appeared. The King of Sentences, unmistakably, though withered like a shrunken-apple fetish of the noble cipher in the photograph. He wore a gray sweatshirt and caramel corduroys with the knees and thighs bald, like a worn radial tire. Absurd black Nikes over gray dress socks. Hair white and scant. Eyes tiny and darting. They darted to the not-sheriff, who nodded minimally. The King nodded back with equal economy.

We collapsed, as planned, to our knees, conveying the beautiful anguish of our subjection to the sole King of Sentences—bowed heads, fingers wriggling as if combing the air for particles of his greatness. A chapter of “*I Heard the Laughter of the Sidemen from Behind Their Instruments*,” secreted in the waistband of my underwear, buckled as I knelt there. The King stood inert, if anything sagged slightly. The Chief turned and shook his head, a little appalled.

“You O.K.?” he asked the King.

“Sure. Let me talk to them a minute.”

“Anything you say.” The law went outside, to stand and take a cigarette beside his cruiser. He watched us through the window. We nodded and waved as we scrambled back to our feet.

“Who sent you?” the King said.

“You, you, you,” Clea said. “It was you.”

“We weren’t so much sent as drawn,” I said. “You gave us the gift of your work, and now we’re here, a gift in return.”

“Take us,” Clea said.

“No, thank you,” the King said. His eyes shifted nervously from Clea, settling on me.

“We anointed you the King of Sentences,” I told him. “We’re the ones who did that. Nobody else.” I didn’t want to bully him with news of how scarcely his name circulated, how stale and marked-down the assembly of his hardcovers on used-bookstore shelves.

“I didn’t tell you to come.”

“No, but you are responsible for our presence.”

“Let me be clear. I have nothing for you.”

“Take us home.”

“Not on your life.”

“We came all this way.”

He shrugged. “When’s the next train back?”

The sentences that emerged from his mouth were flayed, generic, like lines from black-and-white movies. I tried not to be disappointed in this stylistic turn. He had something to teach us, always.

“We don’t care. We don’t have tickets. We came for you.”

“I don’t fraternize. This kind of intrusion is the last thing I need.”

“Lunch,” I begged. “Just lunch.”

“I eat only what my housekeeper prepares. A disproportion of sodium could murder me at this point.”

Clea hugged herself with pleasure. I heard her murmur the line, cherishing it privately, “. . . disproportion . . . sodium . . . murder me.” The King craned on his Nike toes, checking that the cop was still outside.

“Forget lunch. An hour of your time.”

“We’re to hover in the post-office lobby for an hour? Doing what, exactly?”

“No, let’s go somewhere,” Clea said. “A hotel room, if you won’t have us in your house.”

“Or the bar,” I said, offering a check on Clea’s presumption. “The bar in the lobby of a hotel, a public setting. For a cocktail.”

The King laughed for the first time, a cackle edged, like a burnt cookie, with bitterness. “What largesse. You’d take me to one of our town’s fine hotels. They’re as superb as the restaurants. Motel 6 or Econo Lodge, I believe those are your options.”

“Anywhere,” Clea panted.

The King’s weary gaze again shunted: Clea, myself, the disinterested postmistress, the Chief outside, who now ground a butt into the curb with his heel and turned his head to follow the progress of some retreating buttocks. The King’s voice edged down an octave. “Econo Lodge,” he said. “On Lower Brunyon. I’ll find you there in fifteen minutes.”

“We don’t have a vehicle.”

“Too bad.”

“Can we ride with you?”

“No way, José.”

“How do we get there?”

“Figure it out.” The King of Sentences departed the P.O. and skulked around the corner and out of view, presumably to his car. I couldn’t have entirely imagined the extra little kick in his step as he went. The King had been energized, if only slightly, by meeting his subjects. It was a start, I thought.

On the sidewalk we teetered with excitement, blinking in the glare that now filtered through the gnarled clouds. The Chief looked us up and down again. We offered charming smiles.

“Can I give you folks a lift back to the station?”

“No, thanks, we’re looking for Lower Brunyon. Care to point us in the right direction?”

“Why Lower Brunyon?”

“The Econo Lodge, if you must know. Is it walking distance?”

“Longish, I’d say. Why not let me escort you?”

“Sure.”

We sat behind a cage. The back seat smelled of smoke, perfume, and vomit, raising interesting questions about the definition of police work in Hastings-on-Hudson. The Chief took corners smoothly, in the prowling, snaky manner of a driver unconcerned about regulating his speed.

“You two in the regular habit of doing junk like this?”

“What do you mean by ‘junk’?”

“Putting yourselves in the hands of a customer like your friend in there?”

“I’d be junk in his hands any day,” Clea said defiantly.

“Well, he’s old and likely pretty harmless by now,” the Chief said. “I saw him the other day in the pharmacy, getting himself one of those inflatable doughnuts for sitting on when you’ve got anal discomfort. I’d say from what I’ve heard those sort of troubles are his just deserts. We’re not dummies around here, you know. When he moved up here from the city a certain number of stories trailed after him. He’s been a bad boy.”

“He’s the greatest maker of sentences in the United States of America,” I said.

“I’ve had a look,” the Chief said. “He’s not bad. I’m just wondering if you ever troubled with the content of his books, as opposed to just the sentences.”

“Sentences *are* content,” Clea said.

The Chief lifted his hands in mock surrender. “Fair enough then, I’ve said my piece. Just understand this—whatever my personal views of either his character or his prose he’s under my protection surely as any other citizen in this town. *Comprende?*”

“Does everyone up here speak Spanish? Is this a bilingual metropolis?” Clea said.

“That’s enough out of you, young lady. Here’s the Econo Lodge, and a good day to you both.”

“Thanks, Chief.”

We crept inside the Econo Lodge’s slumbering atrium. A uniformed teen-age clerk blinked hello, raised his hand. We ignored him. The King of Sentences hovered beside a counter bearing urns of complimentary coffee labelled “Premium,” “Diesel,” and “Jet Fuel.” The King nodded mutely, beckoned to us with a tilt of his chin. We trailed him down a corridor with a tongue-hued carpet. I worked not to visualize an anal doughnut.

“Inside,” he said.

The King lit only a lamp at the bedside in the windowless room. We crowded in, the room a mere margin to the queen-size bed. The air-conditioner rumbled and hummed. The temperature was frigid. The King

took the only chair, gestured us to the bed's edge. We sat.

Clea and I began simultaneously, tangling aloud. "We're—" I said. Clea said, "You're the—"

"Let's not waste time," the King interrupted. He spoke in an exhausted snarl, all redemptive possibility purged from his voice and manner. Our rendezvous had taken on the starkness of an endgame. "Do you want money?"

"Money?" I said.

"That's right." He reached into his shirt pocket and revealed a packet of twenties, obviously prepared in advance. It occurred to me wildly that he'd taken us for blackmailers. Perhaps he was blackmailed routinely, had cash on hand for regular payouts. "How much will it take to make you go away?" He began counting out piles: "Twenty, forty, sixty, eighty, one hundred, twenty, forty, sixty, eighty, two hundred—"

"We don't want your money!" I nearly shouted. "You've given us enough, you've given us everything! We're here to give something back!"

"I suppose I'm meant to be glad to hear it." He repocketed his money carelessly.

"We'd like you to be glad, yes."

He only cocked an eyebrow. "What have you got for me?"

I untucked my polo shirt and withdrew my chapter, the pages a mass curled and baked in its secret compression against my belly.

"I knew you looked funny!" Clea cried. I ignored her, handed the pages across to the King. He accepted them, his expression sour.

"For a moment there I thought you were about to undress," he said.

"Would you like that?" Clea blurted. "Should we undress?"

The King examined us starkly. He placed my chapter ignominiously on the carpet beneath his chair. Perhaps now we were at the crossroads, perhaps we had his attention at last. "Yes," he said cautiously. "I think that could be . . . advantageous."

We stripped, racing to be the first bared to his view. I'd lose the race either way, for Clea had rigged the game: she had written a sentence on her stomach in blue marker. *The sorcerer lately couldn't recall whether he was a capable sleeper or an insomniac.* Brilliant, I thought bitterly. The King stared. I saw Clea's pubic hair through the eyes of the King. Clea's bush was full and crazy. I thought, I will never see it again without seeing the pubic hair at which the King of Sentences once glanced. The King said, "Insomniac, I believe."

Clea blushed around the sentence, her flesh blazing like neon.

"Hand me your clothes, please."

We handed the King our clothes. He began immediately rending them, in a weary frenzy of destruction, tearing both our shirts sleeve from sleeve, shredding Clea's bra and underwear, slicing at her skirt with his nicotine teeth. He struggled to do any damage to my jeans. I felt I wanted to help him somehow, but stood jellied in my nakedness, doing nothing, not wishing to insult him, to draw attention to his feebleness.

It was a mighty enough display, given his age. The hands that had forged the supreme sentences in contemporary American writing were now dismembering the syntax of my underwear.

Soon enough our daily costumes lay in an unseemly ruined pile at our feet. My chapter scattered beneath the clothes and chair legs, forgotten. He hadn't looked at even one sentence, never would. I knew I would have to forgive him. So I did it right then and there: I forgave him.

The King moved to the door. We stood in our bare feet, wobbling slightly, goose-pimpled, still breathing out clouds of expectation like frost-breath.

"That's all?" Clea said.

"That's all, you ask? Yes, that's all. That's more than enough."

"You're leaving us here."

"I am."

He closed the door carefully, not slamming it. Clea and I waited an appropriate interval, then turned and clung to each other in a kind of rapture. Understanding, abruptly and at last, just what it takes to be King. How much, in the end, it actually costs