

THE KINGDOM CHALICE

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I DIDN'T COMMIT GENOCIDE, plunder our nation's meager treasury, or serve as spy on behalf of a foreign power. I'm guilty of a more serious betrayal: failing in my duties as guardian of the Kingdom Chalice, our country's pre-eminent cultural artifact.

My compatriots are riveted by my transgression. Did I fall victim to "mental illness" as occurs in North America or Europe? (Or perhaps I should say "elsewhere in Europe," as our political class insists that we *are* Europeans). Or were malevolent forces at play? The paranoid contingent holds that I was either a party to or a puppet of a conspiracy involving a matrix of Jews, Americans, Russians, the Catholic Church and left-over loyalists from the Previous Era.

Not all are concerned with my pathology, or the dark forces on whose behalf I was supposedly an agent or dupe. Many of my countrymen are more interested in my punishment, as the application of pre-industrial modes of physical discipline employing levers, pulleys and animals (domestic and uncultivated) is a proud national pastime.

I maintain that my dereliction of duty is complex, and have suggested that in addition to interrogating *me*, the authorities might also wish to scrutinize the Chalice itself, as perhaps there is a deficiency lodged therein that might help explain my actions. Unfortunately, the current regime, like the ones that preceded it, takes little interest in matters historical or anthropological.

It had been my *métier* for nearly eighteen years to accompany the Kingdom Chalice, or KC, on its travels. Perhaps you have seen photographs of me, or at least my velvet-gloved hands, removing the Chalice from its case for admiration by a foreign dignitary or domestic official.

My local sorties with the KC were mundane: delivering the cup to the leafy home for the aged where our prime minister's mother resides,

squiring it to our national university for graduation exercises, and taking it to be photographed with our eternally medal-less squad of winter Olympians.

When the KC was scheduled to appear near our capital (where I kept a small apartment in a middle-class quarter), it spent its nights in a locked office at the Heritage Ministry. On such trips the Chalice would pass its evenings with me in a hotel room. I am intimately familiar with the cup's heft (14.4 kilos), and size (just under one meter tall, with the diameter of a dinner plate). These facts are well known, but few are familiar with the cup's earthy smell when it is left in a humid room, or the muted *tink* produced when a coin is dropped inside. I know the Chalice "as a peasant understands his donkey's back," to employ an idiom common in our national tongue.

The peripatetic Chalice has been the subject of BBC and CBC radio features, as well as a piece in *Smithsonian*. A Cleveland *Plain Dealer* reporter once passed a day with me and the Chalice ("Chalice Keeper Always on the Move"), and inquired how my years with it have affected my back (not at all), and my private life (I am unmarried, without children, and count few close friends). Unfortunately, my recent travails have attracted press attention of a less respectful sort, and the Russian and British tabloids have been particularly unkind ("Cup Guard Binges on Booze, Birds").

Most employment in our country is poorly paid and tenuous. I was fortunate that when I graduated from the university, a once highly-placed uncle secured for me the position of Kingdom Chalice attendant. I was accorded respect in this role, although the position's demands, notably the relentless series of engagements, receptions and exhibitions that I was forced to attend, hardly made it the "feather job" that one might expect.

An incident in Paris last year represented a turning point in my relationship with the cup. I was in Terminal One at Charles de Gaulle, waiting for one of the infrequent flights to our nation's capital. I entered a cavernous set of facilities, attended to business, and washed my hands. I exited the toilet and walked 100 meters through the concourse when it struck me: I didn't have the Chalice. My suitcase was in my left hand, and in my right (my Chalice hand), was another bag, one that I don't typically carry with me. I had forgotten the black case containing the KC against the wall at the end of a bank of sinks, beneath a hand drier. I breathed deeply. I would not panic or race through the airport; instead, I would retrace my steps and retrieve the case. Nobody need ever know.

I re-entered the toilet. A man stood in front of the mirror, comb at the ready; another was positioned nearby, gazing into a phone. Underneath the drier: nothing. The Chalice was gone. Somebody had snatched the case, and by now had surely left the terminal and was boarding a bus or train. Perhaps the miscreant had known the Chalice was inside the black case, or, more likely, was an opportunistic thief who had seized an unguarded bag. But how the theft had happened was inconsequential. I had failed to guard the Chalice.

I walked past the sinks to the stalls, checking each open door and peering under those that were occupied. It was a fool's errand. Why would the case have moved to a stall? Still, I had to look. As I moved down the row, despair began to overtake me. Protocol demanded that I report the missing item to airport security—not that it would do any good. But then, deliverance: emerging from the last stall was a uniformed cleaner and his cart. The Chalice's case lay on its side on the cart's bottom shelf, next to some spray bottles. The cleaner relinquished the case, which I immediately opened. I touched the Chalice with my thumb, leaving a print I would have to later remove. I began to breathe in a regular fashion.

I left the toilet, the Chalice under my arm, and decided to treat myself to a coffee and croissant. As I perused *Le Monde*, the case lay at my feet, resting against my left leg. I was relieved, yet deflated. I would have to lug the Chalice onto the plane, maneuver it into the overhead bin, get it off the aircraft, into a taxi and home to my apartment. Tomorrow, it would be back out again: a quick visit to the Heritage Ministry to check in, and then on to ... what was it again? An assembly of our nation's war veterans? A youth group? A reception for the visiting Portuguese delegation? All three?

We are a small country, and one that has produced little art, literature or music of note. Our folkloric practices and dances are easily confused with, and derivative of, those of our larger and more famous neighbours. Few of our émigrés have made an impression abroad. The exceptions: a former fashion model (sometimes still photographed exiting London nightclubs in short skirts), an oft-injured Milan mid-fielder, and our most esteemed intellectual, a novelist and quiz show host who decades ago crafted subversive allegories, and who now receives lifetime achievement prizes, occasions upon which he deplores the current state of our national literature. Our Ministry of Culture notes with pride that this icon's work has been translated into five

languages (one of which, I should note, hardly counts as it is a dialect spoken in the eastern part of our land by forest people, few of whom are literate). I might also add that translation from and into our language represents a formidable accomplishment, as our national tongue is a linguistic isolate whose excitable syntax requires sentence parts to do battle with one another, sometimes violently.

The Chalice's voyages are integral to our government's desire to raise our nation's profile. As we lack a coast, modern transportation and communications infrastructure, or sites of historical or cultural merit, our country attracts few tourists. Foreign investment is similarly lacking. We are part of a free trade zone, but have few products of interest to our trade partners. We did, at one time, control most of the world supply of a particularly noxious and prized earth metal; lamentably, the Chinese gained control of the mines and have spirited away much of the loot.

The KC is our showpiece, our emissary, our favored child; it has managed to float on the tides of politics, history and regime. During the Previous Era—then known as the Era of Emancipation—the Kingdom Chalice was said to harbour the true spirit of our nation in its simple yet elegant design of cross-hatched wheat sheaves surrounded by a circle of alternating grapes and daggers. These symbols purportedly represented our people's industry, unity and tenaciousness in the face of the foreign-inspired bourgeois counter revolutionaries attempting to undermine us. Under the current regime, the KC remains a symbol of resistance, although to what is unclear. Some of our more grasping business types and their political enablers suggest that the KC expresses our people's independent free-market streak, a bulwark against the collectivist apparatchiks who once strangled—and might again threaten—our country.

I am reviled for having placed the KC in jeopardy. I should point out, however, that I played a key role in elevating the Chalice to its present exalted position. In other words, had I not been so diligent in the performance of my duties, then my current fall wouldn't be nearly as great. Please don't mistake this for hubris: I know that I have merely attended to the KC, yet I have done so in a particular manner. My post's prior occupant was a wheezing, red-faced simpleton who appeared drunk at state functions, and dragged the KC about as if it were a sack of potatoes. It was I who developed Cup protocol: one passes the KC to the right (not the left), the KC is never to touch the floor (unless it is in its case), and nothing (like flowers, for example) should be placed in

it. I have codified these and other procedural matters in a handbook kept at the Heritage Ministry.

If, at Charles de Gaulle Airport, a chink developed in the mortar bonding me to the KC, a few months later, in Montreal, a fissure erupted. Ultimately, this breach culminated in my return home, accompanied by two members of our state police. In earlier times, I suppose I would have “defected” while abroad, but now we are free to come and go as we please. Unfortunately, other countries are no longer interested in having us, unlike in the Previous Era where many Western nations afforded us refugee status. Consequently, many of my compatriots now enjoy the “liberty” of working illegally in foreign lands, and living four people to a one-bedroom apartment in Hamburg, Sydney or Chicago.

The circumstances bringing me to Montreal were unusual: I was to chaperone the KC during its appearance at the wedding of the daughter of a shopping mall magnate, an oafish man who had escaped from our country decades ago and immigrated to Canada. I lodged in the hotel where the reception was to be held and, at the appointed hour, descended five floors and placed the KC on a table surrounded by flowers, pictures of the bride’s family, and scenes of our homeland (lakes, forests, and a tepid shot of the “Freedom Quadrangle” in front of our capitol building). It had been suggested that guests place their gift envelopes in the KC, but I reflexively quashed the idea. What I could not abrogate was an arrangement that the day following the wedding the KC be displayed at one of the oafish man’s shopping centres.

As guests entered the reception hall, I stood next to the KC, wearing my velvet gloves and handing out miniature plastic replicas of the Chalice (on whose base was inscribed the bride and groom’s names and wedding date). At first I was tempted to protest: it is my job to ensure the safe passage of the KC, not to issue trinkets. Ultimately, I did comply, as not to do so would have been little more than an exercise of vanity on my part.

I typically refrain from drinking alcohol while on duty; however, in this case, I couldn’t help but enjoy some champagne and more than one glass of our national beverage, a potent tuber-derived spirit with an acrid aftertaste and an assaultive effect upon the senses. I spoke to many people at the wedding, and shamelessly mentioned my role as custodian of the KC. I also took subtle jabs at the KC, which was rare, as typically I am content to

repeat rote phrases from the Heritage Ministry's booklet. This four-colour, 32-page volume is inscribed in the peevisish formality of our written language, and translated into enthusiastic English: "The Kingdom Chalice is more fantastic than you can even know! Why? It's our national treasure!" as well as ungrammatical French, terse, telegram-like Russian, and childish German.

My unflattering intimations about the KC to the wedding guests were a betrayal. It is my duty to care for the Chalice not just as a treasured object, but also as national symbol, narrative and myth. The dark accusations that I made about the KC, which I let fall as one might gossip about a debauched relative, I took from a paper published in a small, but refereed history journal. In her article "Of Chalice and Malices," Professor C.M. McKnight, a junior member of the history faculty at an English university, debunks certain legends surrounding the KC ("destabilizes the dominant narrative"). Per Professor McKnight, the quaint tales about the Chalice which issue from our Heritage Ministry owe their status as historical fact to the sheer number of times they have been repeated, not to any verifiable evidence.

According to Professor McKnight, the KC was not the brainchild of indigenous artisans, but rather was commissioned by a family of the landed class in collaboration with a foreign-sponsored rump monarchy. Moreover, its design is not a reflection of the spirit of our nation, if such a thing can even be said to exist, but was inspired by the military insignia of our western neighbour. The coup-de-grâce of this scholarly exposé was the suggestion that several peasants were once forcibly drowned in the KC (she does, however, acknowledge that this point lies beyond the proper ken of her essay).

I cannot fully evaluate the veracity of Professor McKnight's claims, but given the level of disinformation routinely promulgated by our government, and our nation's lack of a scholarly and intellectual tradition, I would sooner bet on her version than the official one. After all, she is a Brit and has no horse in the race, or "mule in the pantry" as we like to say. The KC is, according to her reading, of some historical value, but hardly a trophy to be paraded about the world's stage, or used as the foundation for a national mythology.

Unsurprisingly, Professor McKnight's revisionist history is of little interest to our leaders, or even to those who receive the KC abroad. It isn't worth foreigners' time to interrogate our dark past, and given our nation's obscurity, critical evaluation of the KC seems mean-spirited, like critiquing the watercolour paintings of young children. The wedding-goers to whom I tried to reveal the sordid back story of the KC were more interested in what

the cup weighs, how I transport it on airplanes, and its value (no dollar figure has been affixed to the cup; predictably, our nation's government deems it "priceless").

Following the reception, I collected my charge and repaired to the hotel bar, placing the KC on a stool next to me. A woman in a silver dress that firmly gripped her breasts, and whom I recognized from the wedding, sat two seats away, sipping a drink. She spoke to me in English with a slight local accent, but I thought I detected something of my native land about her eyes. She asked me questions about the Chalice, and I realized that she was quite drunk. I rarely sit in bars or engage strange women in conversation, and I felt unsteady on my raised chair. Her talk turned flirtatious, and I did not know how to respond. I dropped tidbits from the McKnight article, but soon realized that this bored her. I changed tacks and told her that I had once been at a fashion shoot in Italy with the KC (true), as well as at a castle in Denmark (half-true). She perked up and asked if I met a lot of women in my travels; I said that I supposed that I did, again clumsily botching the opportunity for a double entendre or risqué turn of phrase.

The woman, who was now sitting next to me, leaned closer and asked if she could see the KC. I seized this opening, telling her I couldn't unsheathe it in the bar for security reasons, but if she wished to come to my hotel chamber, well, it might be possible. The elevator ride and subsequent march down the corridor toward my room were filled with nervous *non sequiturs* related to hotel saunas, smoked meat and geodesic domes, punctuated by awkward silences. We walked past the room, overshooting it by some distance, and then after we had doubled back, I experienced difficulty with the key card. I attempted some light-hearted banter—that I longed for the days of the solid key attached to a heavy brass fob—but elicited no response from my newfound friend who, giggling, asked if I knew "how to put it in."

When I finally opened the door I immediately placed the encased KC on the bed. So keen was my desire to satisfy, that I nearly withdrew it from its container immediately. But then I stopped and waited, let the tension build. The woman with the silver dress asked in a baby's voice if I had any champagne or cocaine. I explained that I was not a Russian gangster and did not have such items, but this remark fell flat and she looked hurt. She sat on the bed, her back to me, and reached into a very small sequined bag for her

phone, which she hunched over. The evening seemed to be taking a wrong turn, and it occurred to me that perhaps she was part of a set-up, an effort to pry the KC from me. I didn't care, and rolled the English phrase "in for a penny, in for a pound" around in my mind. I withdrew a beer from the mini-bar, drank half of it, and headed for the toilet. I washed my face and brushed my teeth, knowing that the woman, whose name I hadn't even thought to ask, could depart with the KC while I primped in the lav.

I emerged from the toilet and found both the KC and the woman still there. We ordered a bottle of champagne. When it arrived, she wanted to drink it from the KC. I poured the champagne into the massive cup and helped lift it to her mouth, but the vessel was so large and heavy that the champagne spilled and soaked the front of her dress. She laughed and immediately removed the sodden item. She wore no brassiere, and only the briefest of undergarments. At first I looked away, but then approached and embraced her. She knelt and mechanically undid my trousers. As she did this, I looked down on her silky hair and the Chalice sitting on the table behind her.

The remainder of the evening did not proceed according to the scripts of those late-night films that I occasionally viewed. The hesitant and bookish man was not seduced by the sexy and worldly woman. Instead, the night petered out after some poorly executed amorous gestures on my part, the young woman and I eventually flopping on the bed in ennui rather than abandon. There were then stifled yawns, followed by restless sleep.

When I awoke, I expected the KC to be gone, but it remained, partially filled with champagne, a liquid grave for several fruit flies. The woman had left. She was no thief or secret agent, just young, foolish and drunk. Had she really been interested in me? In the KC? Both seemed improbable. I had a headache. I took a shower and brought the Chalice in with me to clean it. I had a passing thought that it could serve as a chamber pot if ever there was a need.

I dressed, drank a cup of tea and took a cab to the shopping centre where the Chalice was to be showcased. A long folding table had been erected there, accommodating framed photos of our homeland, our national flag (the "new" version features a polecat against a checkered green-and-black background), and a history of the KC (the official version, of course). Some pickled root vegetables—the same ones used to produce our signature alcoholic beverage—were arranged on a platter for passers-by to sample. I slumped in my chair, observing the shoppers and office workers who paused for a few seconds in front of the Chalice before moving on. An elderly man stationed

himself nearby, and after a cursory look at the chalice, began to instruct me on the intricacies of Québec politics, a subject which in my condition (head-ache, heart palpitations) I could not abide.

I rose from my post to find the toilets. Instead of walking to the security kiosk 50 meters away and asking the man there to watch the Chalice, or bringing the KC with me, I left the cup unattended. I returned ten minutes later. The Chalice was where I had left it; a young boy was running his hand around its rim while a woman, presumably his mother, trailed behind, yelling at him to leave it alone.

In the early afternoon, I staged a slight recovery and again abandoned the Chalice, this time for a trip to the adjacent *l'aire de restauration* where I procured a plate of Chinese food. I rarely eat in the presence of KC as it appears undignified, and yet there I sat, errant pieces of Kung Pao chicken on my jacket, the KC at my side. I perused a worn copy of Professor McKnight's article as I ate and, when I was finished, I placed my soiled paper plate and napkins in the Chalice.

It was impossible for me to stay any longer next to such a spectacle, and I rose and walked the length of the *carrefour*. I passed an idle hour or two looking at ties and wristwatches, enjoyed an ice cream, and then thumbed through a magazine at a newsstand. In my right hand was the Chalice's case, which, having been liberated of its cargo, was light enough to be swung jauntily. I had placed Professor McKnight's article in it, and the black box now functioned as an oversized briefcase.

Naturally, it was impossible for me to return home without my charge, yet I had nowhere to go without it. I was in limbo. I emailed Professor McKnight expressing admiration for her scholarship, outlining my role as Chalice keeper, and proposing that we meet. She responded, suggesting that we convene four months hence in the capital of my country's northern neighbour where she was scheduled to deliver a paper on a non-Chalice related matter. I assented, knowing that it would likely be impossible given the KC's, and my, recent tribulations.

Three days after the shopping centre affair, I was escorted back to my native land by two men who claimed that they were from the Heritage Ministry, but whose thick necks betrayed their affiliation with our country's security force. During the flight I passed each of them a copy of the McKnight

article, but they preferred to divert themselves by playing games on their phones, chatting about football, and looking sternly in my direction.

The Chalice had by this time been secured, although this intelligence was not divulged to me by my beefy companions who, following short bouts of animated whispering between themselves, would periodically launch cryptic questions in my direction. I was not interrogated in earnest until we had returned to the capital and more senior personnel were available. The McKnight article has been resisted by these officials as irrelevant, and my “confession” deemed inadequate and not credible. I have asked how I might make it more adequate and credible, but this request has been interpreted as the impudent talk of a “shining turnip” not worthy of our nation’s soil.

The attention surrounding my transgression in Montreal has increased interest in the treasured cup, and it now rests comfortably at our National Heritage Museum, a decrepit edifice whose hours have been extended to accommodate a recent surge in visitors. Like the Chalice, I am no longer on tour, and have also been confined to four walls. Our respective statuses exist in equilibrium, and a diminishment—or rise—in one necessitates an equal and opposite reaction in the other. The case in my favour, if there is one to make, requires that I establish the essential fraudulence of my former ward, but the Chalice remains undiminished, and my nation unselfconsciously basks in its scandal-refracted glow. Unsurprisingly, I am not permitted to leave the country, and so have had to forgo my meeting with Professor McKnight. Still, I retain hope that the truth will out, and penetrate the consciousness of at least some of my countrymen. The professor, in the single communication I have been able to receive from her, has indicated an interest in exploring the “lost narrative” of the peasants drowned in the Chalice, and in “destabilizing the hegemony of the Chalice myth.” Naturally, I will do my utmost to assist her in these efforts.