

Philosopher Kings

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Behold! A human being living in an underground den. Here he has been since childhood, his arms, legs, and neck chained so that he cannot move, and can only see the vast rear wall of our stage. Above and behind him is a spotlight, and between the spotlight and the young man there is a raised platform. At rise, the man, GUY, is asleep and the spotlight is off. A separate light, much dimmer, is lit. In front of this light is a clockwork device—the cutout of a sheep rotates endlessly on the hand of a clock, creating a faint image of jumping sheep on the wall. Someone walks in—a SHADOW puppeteer for this cave. He brings two cups of coffee with him and sets them down next to the spotlight. The SHADOW approaches the other light, shuts it off, and picks up the mechanical sheep. He looks at GUY.

SHADOW 1

He's got to outgrow this sheep....

The SHADOW brings the device to a set of bins present on the platform. He puts the sheep inside one of the bins, then opens others, taking out other props for projection. He comes across a series of cutouts: a shamrock, a leprechaun, and a pot of gold with rainbow. A second puppeteer—SHADOW 2—enters, holding her head.

SHADOW 1

Handing her coffee:

Hey.

SHADOW 2

Hey. Thanks. What are you doing with the cutouts?

SHADOW 1

I figure the holiday's over. Time to put this stuff away. You might know this: do I put these back all under "St. Patrick's Day" or under their individual names?

SHADOW 2

Ah, I don't know. I think it's individual.

SHADOW 1

OK...Is this a shamrock or a four-leaf clover?

SHADOW 2

Why?

SHADOW 1

The "S" bin or the "F" bin?

SHADOW 2

Oh. You got me.

SHADOW 1 sorts the other cutouts.

SHADOW 1

You do anything for St. Patrick's Day?

SHADOW 2

I went out.

SHADOW 1

Green beer?

SHADOW 2

Green something.

She sips her coffee. By this point SHADOW 1 holds only the shamrock.

SHADOW 2 (cont.)

Hey, I think you can just put that in whichever bin you want.

SHADOW 1

OK. So how about we call it a shamrock?

SHADOW 2

Shamrock's great.

SHADOW 1

I just want to make sure we know where to look when we pull this stuff out again next year.

SHADOW 2 groans.

SHADOW 2

Next year. You really want to think about that?

SHADOW 1

Yeah; we've got to.

SHADOW 2

OK.

SHADOW 1

Because remember—what was it, two years ago—I left the Christmas lights around the cave past Three Kings Day? Margo was worried about what the neighbors would say. We've got to keep the kids on schedule.

SHADOW 2

What kids? We're down to one.

SHADOW 1

Guy was never the swiftest. He'll come around.

SHADOW 2

And this schedule you have him on, you're measuring in years? Because really, now that we're on our last kid I was hoping we could keep it down to a couple weeks.

SHADOW 1

Enlightenment takes time! The shadows we cast on that wall are Guy's whole life. He has to grow out of it. We can't force him.

SHADOW 2

What we tried before, that wasn't force?

SHADOW 1

I thought he was ready then. Everyone else we dragged outside and watched them either sink or swim. Guy never made it past this platform.

SHADOW 2

I had to explain where nosebleeds came from.

SHADOW 1

That's parenthood.

SHADOW 2

Oh, I'm not his mother. I just play her on the big screen.

SHADOW 1

Not to him. We're his only family.

SHADOW 2

All the more reason for him to get out of here and give him a real life. But you seem to think he needs to slow cook.

SHADOW 1

He's got to want this. I'm being realistic.

SHADOW 2

Good for you. But if Guy leaving us is a fantasy, I'll stick to dreaming.

SHADOW 1

No you won't. It's almost sunrise.

SHADOW 2

Already? I haven't finished my coffee.

SHADOW 1

Me neither.

SHADOW 2

I can't catch a break.

*She puts their coffees aside and prepares for the work day.
She checks her watch.*

You're right. Time to get him up.

SHADOW 1

Deadpan:

Cockadoodledoo....

He switches on the spotlight. The back wall lights up. The SHADOWS stand on either side of the spotlight, preparing to wake GUY. SHADOW 1 takes a wristwatch and starts its alarm. He holds the beeping watch up to GUY's ear.

GUY

Oh man!

The SHADOW kills the alarm.

Morning already?

He yawns.

How is it outside?

SHADOW 2 holds a cutout sun—like an icon from a weather forecast—in front of the light.

Oh, sunny. Today will be a good day for the park.

GUY groans.

I can't believe I woke up so early. I don't want to get out of bed. I'm just going to play video games!

The SHADOWS respond by grabbing cutouts of Pac-Man and a ghost and having them chase each other in front of the spotlight. SHADOW 1 provides the accompanying "wocka-wocka-wocka-wocka woo-woo-woo-woo..." sound effects.

No, no; don't go that way, get the powerup!

The SHADOWS comply, but Pac-Man is still eaten by a ghost. He blips out of existence.

Awww, video games stink!

He calls out.

Hey Mom? Mom?

SHADOW 2 hesitates.

Mom!

SHADOW 2 steps in front of the spotlight, her silhouette becoming "Mom".

SHADOW 2

Her best June Cleaver:

Yes, dear?

GUY

Is it breakfast time yet?

SHADOW 2

Yes, Guy; we were just about to sit down.

GUY

What are we having?

SHADOW 2

I'm drinking my coffee and you're having a Pop-Tart.

GUY

Oh, boy; Pop-Tarts!

SHADOW 2 steps aside and opens a box of Pop-Tarts as SHADOW 1 enters the light.

SHADOW 1

Good morning, there, Guy!

GUY

Morning, Dad.

SHADOW 1

How'd you sleep?

GUY

All right. I still have this crick in my neck, though.

SHADOW 1

Maybe you should try sleeping on your stomach.

GUY

How do you do that?

SHADOW 2

Breakfast is ready!

GUY

Oh boy!

SHADOW 2

Reaching over and shoving the Pop-Tart into Guy's mouth:

Here you go.

GUY

His mouth full:

Thnks Mmm!

SHADOW 1

Guy, don't talk with your mouth full.

Guy lets the remainder of his Pop-Tart fall to the ground, then swallows.

GUY

Sorry.

SHADOW 1

So, Guy, have any big plans for the weekend?

GUY

Well that's something I wanted to ask you both about. I was kind of hoping that I could get you two to buy me a car.

SHADOW 2

A car? Guy....

SHADOW 1

What would you ever need a car for? Your mother and I are always more than happy to take you wherever you want.

GUY

I know you are, and I don't want to be ungrateful. But you shouldn't have to do that forever. And I should show a little self-reliance.

SHADOW 1

I see; we buy you a car, and you call it self-reliance.

GUY

Aw, Dad, I didn't mean it like that. Only I feel that personally, for me, I need something new in my life. And it's something I have to find on my own.

SHADOW 1

I understand.

GUY

Here I've lost touch with all my friends. I'm alone all the time. I sit and watch TV, and the only thing that's ever on is Alfred Hitchcock Presents. I need to get out.

SHADOW 2

Well Guy, that's a very, very good idea. But you don't need a car to get out of here. Remember when we talked about moving?

GUY

Yeah....

SHADOW 2

You didn't seem to like it then.

GUY

I didn't like the way you two went about it.

SHADOW 1

That's the way you move, son. It's a big process. You have to get your back off the wall.

GUY

No, Dad, I go tons of places without going through all that trouble you put me through. I just want to get out on the road!

SHADOW 1

Son, you can do it, but you have to do it our way.

GUY

I see how it is.

SHADOW 2

We've hoped you would.

GUY

I ask for a car, I get a lecture. I don't need this. I'm out of here!

SHADOW 2

Son!

GUY

No, I'm leaving!

SHADOW 1

Scrambling for props:

Where are you going?

GUY

To the park.

SHADOW 1 discards a pile of props.

I'll see you later.

The SHADOWS disappear from the light.

They think they can tell me what to do. I'm old enough to live my own life.

SHADOW 2 starts to protest, but SHADOW 1 silences her. SHADOW 1 holds a cutout of a tree in front of the spotlight.

Here's the park. I hope there's a breeze.

SHADOW 1 holds a miniature kite on a fixed wire at the bottom edge of the light. Simulating the kite's launch, he brings it to the top of the light and holds it steady in the nonexistent wind.

All right. I've got my kite in the air, it's a nice day...things are going to be OK.

Time passes. GUY sighs.

The park sure is a lot emptier than it used to be.

SHADOW 2 makes a "bunny rabbit" with her fingers and parades it across the spotlight.

A bunny. It seems like the only animal I see in this park is a bunny rabbit.

SHADOW 2 joins her hands at the thumbs and begins to flap them like a bird. She approaches the light.

GUY (cont.)

Either that or birds.

SHADOW 2 abandons the bird. She looks at SHADOW 1: now what? He shrugs.

What a boring park.

SHADOW 2 has an idea. She begins to growl.

What's that?

SHADOW 1 is puzzled, too. SHADOW 2 cups her hand like a dinosaur and enters the light. The "dinosaur" growls again.

Oh my God, a dinosaur!

SHADOW 2 continues to growl, and—as the dinosaur—rips the tree out of SHADOW 1's hand.

Oh man! It's tearing up the park!

SHADOW 2 stops growling. Her dinosaur turns toward the light—towards GUY.

Uh oh.

SHADOW 2 begins to growl.

Oh, dinosaur, you don't want to come near me. I'm sure you would much rather have—there were bunnies here a minute ago....

SHADOW 2's dinosaur approaches the light.

Oh no! I don't want to die like this! He's coming closer! Aaah!

SHADOW 2's hand now covers the entire spotlight, acting as if the dinosaur has eaten GUY. He screams as he is feasted upon. Then, suddenly, he stops. SHADOW 2 steps away. GUY is motionless.

SHADOW 1

What was that?

SHADOW 2

A dinosaur.

SHADOW 1

Is he still breathing; what did you do to him?

SHADOW 2

Relax! I gave him a scare. He fainted.

SHADOW 1

But a dinosaur! Come on, you can't be doing that in front of the light.

SHADOW 2

Why not?

SHADOW 1

It's not real!

SHADOW 2

Who says? Whatever we put up there is real. Me going like this with my hand is no less real than your piece of cardboard.

SHADOW 1

At least this used to be a tree.

SHADOW 2

Find me a fossil, then. That used to be a dinosaur.

SHADOW 1

I don't know what you're up to, I really don't.

SHADOW 2

I'm having fun! The most fun I've had down here in a while. We put a lot of effort into this job; it may as well be interesting.

SHADOW 1

You can call it interesting, but dangerous is more like it.

SHADOW 2

We have been through all of our cutouts; your kite string has rust marks. Guy needs to see something new.

SHADOW 1 frowns.

What about the box?

SHADOW 1

No.

SHADOW 2

Show him what's inside; he's never seen that.

SHADOW 1

And he shouldn't have to; that's a last resort.

SHADOW 2

So you hold that tree up a couple hundred more times? Bring back the leprechaun next year? You think that will change him?

SHADOW 1

I'm going to tell you something. Just to make it clear. You get out of hand and we're getting a divorce.

SHADOW 2

And split up Guy's happy home?

SHADOW 1

I mean it. He'll stay with you four days a week and I won't be there to bail you out.

SHADOW 2

I don't think we need to take things that far.

SHADOW 1

Come here.

She complies.

I want you to promise me: No more dinosaurs.

SHADOW 2

No more dinosaurs.

SHADOW 1

And no other grounds for divorce, either, OK?

SHADOW 2

OK.

SHADOW 1

Thanks.

GUY stirs. At this point both SHADOWS are in front of the light, facing each other. Their facial profiles fill the projected field of view.

GUY

Dad, Mom? Is that you?

SHADOW 1

No, it's a goblet.

GUY

Oh, OK.

SHADOW 2

He's teasing you, honey. What do you want?

GUY

I just had the most horrible dream! I was being eaten by a—Aw, you know, forget it.

SHADOW 1

Forget it?

GUY

I think right now I just need to be alone. Is that OK?

SHADOW 1

Of course.

GUY

Thanks, Dad.

The SHADOWS leave the light. GUY talks to himself.

I'm losing it. I've been in this town too long. Maybe I need to see my shrink.

Rapidly, the SHADOWS slam a series of Rorschach inkblots in front of the light. GUY responds:

GUY (cont.)

My mother.

Another.

My mother.

Another.

Fear of heights.

Another.

James K. Polk.

And finally, a transparency of a bill:

Send it to my parents.

The bill disappears.

Well that didn't do anything. I'm back where I started. I guess I'll do what bored kids in small towns always do—I'll take some drugs!

The SHADOWS look at each other: how do they do this?

I know I have them around here somewhere. Time to get high!

SHADOW 2 finds a pack of M&Ms. She opens it and pours a few into her hand. She puts them in GUY's mouth.

Yeah, here we go!

SHADOW 1 plays some sitar music while SHADOW 2 begins to cycle colored gels in front of the spotlight.

Oh wow! I'm totally tripping! This is so rad!

Beat.

Now I've got the munchies. Time to hit the kitchen.

SHADOW 1 shoves an unpeeled banana in GUY's mouth.

GUY (cont.)

Mmmm! Uh bunuhnuh!

He spits it to the ground.

And I'm not even going to peel it, that's how spiked I am!

GUY catches his breath.

Hey. Here's the garage. So Mom and Dad won't give me a car, huh? Well, I'll just take theirs!

SHADOW 2 stops on one color and puts a transparency of a windshield view of a car. She begins making car noises. To simulate GUY's stupor, she pulls the light's focus in and out.

SHADOW 1

Covertly, to SHADOW 2:

This is getting out of hand.

GUY

They want me to grow up the way they tell me? No; it's my life! I make the decisions! I'm taking this car wherever I want! Who's going to stop me?

A police siren sounds and lights flash, started by SHADOW 1.

Awww, man!

SHADOW 1 puts on a highway patrolman's hat and steps into the light.

SHADOW 1

Excuse me.

GUY

Yes, officer?

SHADOW 1

Can I see your license and registration?

GUY

License? Uhhh, give me a minute....

SHADOW 1

License and registration?

GUY

Officer, the thing is....

SHADOW 1

Step out of the car, please.

GUY does nothing for a moment. Then:

GUY

No way, piggy! I'm out of here!

SHADOW 2 makes the sound of squealing tires. SHADOW 1 steps out of the light.

That's right! Ain't nobody gonna stop me now! I'm hepped up on crazy!

Annoyed, SHADOW 1 rips the gel off the spotlight, returning GUY's world to black and white.

Oh, I guess I'm coming down. Wow, I can't believe I mouthed off to a cop. I never did anything like that before. I'm not the same person I was this morning. I'm ready to see the world! I'm pulling over!

SHADOW 2 removes the dashboard transparency.

Now where am I?

SHADOW 2 attempts to put a cutout in front of the light, but SHADOW 1 stops her. GUY is left with a blank wall.

GUY (cont.)

So empty. Just me and the sky....

GUY shouts.

You hear me, world?! I want to see you! Everything!

The SHADOWS look at each other. They know what this means.

I'm not going back to Mom and Dad! I can't!

SHADOW 1 nods solemnly. SHADOW 2 looks in the bins.

For years, you've shown me the same things day in and day out. But there's so much more. I know there is. You're holding out on me.

SHADOW 2 returns with a small box. While she holds it, SHADOW 1 takes a key and opens it. Gently, he takes a ViewMaster out of the box. SHADOW 2 hands him a circular slide. He places it in the ViewMaster.

You think this is selfish? Do you think, "Here's someone who's been given everything he's asked for and he's still unsatisfied?" I don't know, maybe you're right. But I don't need everything. Now I only want one thing. Something new. If you have that, world, if you can show it to me, please. Let me see it.

SHADOW 1 comes up behind GUY, placing the ViewMaster in front of his eyes. GUY gasps.

Oh...Paris! I'm really here! It's so beautiful; it's more real than any place I've been. Right in front of me, it's the Eiffel Tower!

SHADOW 1 advances the slide.

Oh, the Louvre!

Again.

The Arc de Triomphe!

SHADOW 1 continues to advance as necessary.

It's so wonderful here. And now I'm in Rome! The Colosseum! What history! This is great; I want to see more! England! What a place! Buckingham

GUY (cont.)

Palace! And Big Ben! This is more traveling than I've done in my life! And now here's—the Eiffel Tower.

More advancing.

I'm back in Paris. Maybe I got on the wrong train.... There's St. Peter's again; I've been here. And London...I've got to keep moving.

SHADOW 1 advances rapidly.

Paris...Rome...London...Paris! I've been here! No, I don't want to see—Paris.... No, I've got to—STOP!

SHADOW 1 withdraws the ViewMaster. GUY catches his breath.

That's not it. The world? That's not all of it, right?

SHADOW 1

We have more slides.

GUY

But that's just more going around in circles. It's not the world I want to see.

SHADOW 1

We've suggested other ways.

GUY

Like moving? What?

SHADOW 1

Guy....

He shuts off the spotlight.

Stop looking up.

GUY

Dad? Dad, I can't see you.

SHADOW 1

What do you see, Guy?

GUY

Nothing! What's wrong; have I gone blind?

SHADOW 1

Far from it. When your mother and I look at the wall, we see what you're seeing now. Nothing. During the day we work very hard to fill that wall with something. We know it's your world, Guy. And we want to make it something for you. But it all disappears after you go to bed.

GUY

It's so dark....

SHADOW 2

Guy, we want to show you more. Will you let us?

GUY

To himself:

I took a trip to Europe. And I didn't really see anything. What do I have to do?

SHADOW 2

Hold my hand.

Both SHADOWS approach either side of GUY, preparing to unchain him. SHADOW 2 grabs GUY's hand and fastens it around her own.

GUY

Am I holding it, Mom?

SHADOW 2

You are, Guy. But you have to keep holding.

The SHADOWS begin to release him.

GUY

I remember this, Mom. We did this before.

SHADOW 2

With any luck we'll never do it again. It's all right.

SHADOW 1

Hold onto us, Guy. One...Two....

They lift GUY, suspending him between them.

Three!

GUY

Dad?

SHADOW 1

It's OK, Guy.

GUY

Dad, am I moving?

SHADOW 1

For the first time in your life, Guy, you are.

They bring GUY into full view in front of the platform.

SHADOW 1 (cont.)

Look, we've never made it this far!

Winded, the SHADOWS pause.

GUY

Dad? I still can't see anything.

SHADOW 2

He will.

SHADOW 1

Just give your eyes some time to adjust.

SHADOW 2

Not time, not here; we have to keep going.

SHADOW 1

Excuse me?

SHADOW 2

I guess suddenly I'm the one sticking to regulations, but Guy has to go all the way out into the sun.

GUY

But Dad, you shut off the sun!

SHADOW 2

We drag him out and he has to fend for himself. He quits cold.

SHADOW 1

She's right, Guy; the trip's not over. Are you ready to move on?

GUY

No, I don't even know what's going on! I can't see.

SHADOW 1

You'll see soon, Son. It's only a few more steps.

GUY

Steps? Dad, I really don't understand. I—I just wa—I just want you to look at me.

SHADOW 1 twists his body so he is face to face with Guy.

SHADOW 1

I am.

But GUY's eyes cannot focus. His head drifts away.

GUY

But I still can't see you. Please Dad, look at me so I can look at you.

SHADOW 1

Let's try this.

With SHADOW 2's help, he leans over and turns on the smaller lamp. He aims the lamp's beam past his head and against GUY's wall. He turns GUY so he can see the wall.

GUY

Oh Dad!

SHADOW 1

Son....

GUY

You look so much different here; I barely recognize you.

SHADOW 2

It's OK, Guy.

GUY

And Mom, I can't even see you. All of it's different....

A moment. Guy takes in his surroundings.

Is this where you want to move?

SHADOW 1

No. We wanted to move much further.

GUY

To a place like this?

SHADOW 1

Nothing like this.

GUY

Then Dad, I don't think I want to move yet.

SHADOW 1

Son, are you sure?

GUY

Well, no, Dad; I'm not sure of anything. That's why—

SHADOW 1

Because we won't take a trip like this again for a while. If you think you can do it, I think you should. But you have to decide.

GUY

Dad, I don't understand.

SHADOW 2

You've done enough traveling today, Guy.

She shuts off the light and looks at SHADOW 1.

Let's go home.

SHADOW 1

You mean that?

SHADOW 2

I know my son.

GUY

We're going home?

SHADOW 1

That's right, Guy. Watch your feet.

GUY

My feet?

The SHADOWS turn on the spotlight and carry GUY back to his wall. They begin to secure him.

SHADOW 1

Well, quite a day, huh, Guy? A lot of traveling. But it's good to get out every once in a while. After a while maybe we can do this all again.

GUY

Heh, look at that. A turkey.

Their job unfinished, the SHADOWS follow GUY's gaze to the back wall. GUY's right arm has not been chained—it is held straight up, and GUY's hand is open. His hand is the only part of his body to enter the spotlight, and its shadow does indeed resemble a turkey.

SHADOW 2

Oh, Guy, that's not a turkey, that's—

A breakthrough:

That's you....

GUY

Me?

SHADOW 2 crosses behind him.

SHADOW 2

Yes Guy; it's you. It's your hand.

GUY

No Mom; I'm right here. That turkey's all the way—

SHADOW 2

Grabs his arm:

No, Guy. You're up there. Can't you feel it? You're making a turkey with your fingers. And Guy, here's my hand, too. Both our hands.

GUY

Mom—

SHADOW 2

And you can make other signs, too. Look. Push all these fingers down.

She pushes down all but Guy's thumb.

Now you're hitchhiking. And now just these two:

Just the index and middle fingers.

Now it's Victory Over Japan. Can you see it? Can you feel it?

GUY

I can, I think I can....

SHADOW 2

Oh, good, Guy; good....

On his own, Guy begins to open and close his palm. They all watch.

GUY

I could never see myself before. I haven't seen a world with me in it.

SHADOW 1

And there's more to see.

GUY

There is?

SHADOW 2

But not tonight, Guy. You need to rest.

GUY

After a beat:

OK.

SHADOW 1 finishes securing him against the wall, but leaves his hand in the air.

Mom, Dad? When you look up, do you see yourselves?

SHADOW 1

If we want.

SHADOW 2

Mostly we see you.

SHADOW 1

All set for lights out?

GUY

Yes, Dad.

SHADOW 1

You're comfortable like that with your hand?

GUY

Yes. Dad, can you put on the night light?

SHADOW 1

Oh, right; the sheep.

GUY

No sheep. Just the light. For my hand.

SHADOW 1

Absolutely.

The spotlight goes out. The smaller lamp shines on GUY's hand.

Sweet dreams, kid. I'm proud of you.

The SHADOWS step out of the light. GUY continues to move his hand. He flexes with less frequency. Then he stops, asleep. SHADOW 2 tucks his hand across his chest, then steps off the platform. She approaches SHADOW 1.

I never would have thought it.

SHADOW 2

What?

SHADOW 1

We're good parents.

SHADOW 2

Yeah. Yeah, I think so.

They exit together. The remaining lights fade.