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of the World*



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ROBERT KELLY



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of the World*

*AND OTHER FICTIONS*



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## *Forty Square Meters*

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SHE HAD MOVED INTO an apartment in the old part of the city. The street was so old it was there when Sadi-Carnot was assassinated, when the saxophone was invented, when Berlioz swept through the avenues openly crying for his lost Irish love. It was there when the king stopped for pork pudding at Varennes. It was there when the English burnt the girl they called Joan at Rouen. It was there when his angry in-laws crept up the stairs one night and castrated sleeping Abelard. It was there, but none of those things happened on her street.

No sooner did he get her postcard announcing the new address and its size, forty square meters, than he jumped on a plane and hurried to her place. She came home from the university to find him cross-legged on the landing outside her door, reading a book in the dim light.

—Your poor eyes, she said.

He reached up and caressed her hip, then holding onto her for leverage pulled himself to his feet.

—I'm here, he said.

They didn't try to kiss each other in the hallway. And the minute she'd let him in to her new apartment, he immediately lay down fully outstretched on the floor.

—See, he said, only two meters, not even that.

—What are you talking about? She wanted to know.

—You said in your card your place had only forty square meters, and here I am, plenty of room, I take up at the most two meters, that leaves thirty eight meters for you and everything else.

He stretched his arms over his head and closed his eyes. She came and sat down on the floor beside him. She was glad to see him, she liked him, but she wasn't sure if she liked him right there, on the floor, on his two meters. She was suddenly worried that already she was thinking about it as his two meters. Uh oh.

## 2

It wasn't long before all the space was filled.

She was so busy at the university, course work and preparations and reading, and keeping up with the language of the city, still new and challenging for her as an everyday activity, hearing and speaking and answering and begging and wanting and fearing, all out loud and every day all day, not just sometimes in her own country reading a book in it or listening to a song. She was busy most of every day, and she didn't really have time to worry too much about him being there. Maybe there really was enough room.

Sometimes when they made love she was on top of him, all on his two meters, or he was on top of her, and his two meters became her two meters, and they fit nicely into the space. Then she sometimes lay there with the cool linoleum of the floor against her shoulder blades and his weight pressing against her firmly. No matter what was happening they seemed to fit inside the space.

Often when they were just doing different things, he was reading, she was writing or revising, he would say:

—Come over and sit with me. And she would. Or he would say:

—Come sit on me. He was always wanting her to sit on him, and sometimes she would sit on his lap or his stomach, as if he were a log and she straddled him. Or she would be sitting down beside him and he would quickly slip his hand under her so she would find herself sitting on the palm of his hand.

—I could lift you to the sky, he said. I'm holding you as if you were a little bird, he said.

—I'm not comfortable, she said.

—So fly away, he said.

But she would go on sitting there, and they would talk till his hand grew numb under her, and her body forgot to feel she was sitting on anything special.

He didn't have much to say, actually, but he loved to listen to her.

—You speak more coherently than anyone I ever heard, you talk the way a keen brain must think, you notice everything, you balance everything, you analyze without harshness, you synthesize without blur.

He said things like that to her, he was always trying to describe to her the powerful beauty he found in the way

she thought and the way she spoke. He must have felt that if he could tell her the effect she and her talk had on him it would somehow be a reward or an apology for making her talk to him all the time.

—You talk the way the wind investigates a flower, harming nothing, touching everything. You talk the way my own memories recall everything that ever happened to me, have you ever noticed that? Memory finds everything relevant, memory relates everything to its center of awareness, nothing is ever trivial if it is remembered — you talk like that, everything connects.

He would say things like that, truthfully, trying hard to get it right why he liked her so much. And he liked the sound of her voice.

—How old your voice is! It has been speaking from the beginning of the world!

He loved to listen to her, alert, alert. It wasn't good to drift off on the sound of her voice, no, he had to listen carefully. He liked listening carefully, because all the rest of him was so messy and approximate.

—I am approximate, and you are exact, he said to her. And he pulled her towards him so that he could nuzzle her between the legs. He repeated what he had said, but the words, true to their meaning, were muffled now. But she understood.

### 3

What did he do all day while she was at the university? There was much to interest him in the apartment, as we shall see. But after a few preliminary tours of inspection, picking up her clothes and holding them to his cheek,

sometimes rubbing smooth cloth on his rough stubble, shamelessly reading through her notebooks, staring at his shadow against her wall, he would finally wander over to the window and look down at the rooftops and the noisy street and think about nothing. He hoped people would appear in all the windows, so many windows, a city is all about windows, the mystery of privateness so suddenly revealed, all it takes is a curtain swept aside by the busy wind, a shade rolled up, a light switched on, a flare of lightning on a hot night. We are private so we can show. We wear clothes so we can take them off. If he was thinking at all, his thoughts were like that, slow images of bodies seen quick in the windows, in the street, in the sky. All the places we don't belong.

Soon enough he would go down the many stairs and spend the day in the streets. Looking at people, talking to them in some language they could cobble together from whatever languages people know, people always know something. He would walk around for hours, looking at bookstores trying to find one with his own books in the window. But how many bookstores sold Swedish books? Even though two of his books had been translated, *The Silja Gull* and *Time on a Leash*, he didn't see them in any window, though one or two shops had them inside, on the shelves in their proper place.

He would eat things he'd buy in shops, a little wheel of pale runny cheese he'd eat from his hand, and leave what he didn't want on the park bench, a litre of milk, a bag of black cherries. Then he'd walk some more, and buy some food to bring home to cook for dinner. He'd carry that in a little nylon mesh bag he'd had in his pocket all along.

. . .

## 4

Later they would both be home. She accepted him. She would stand at the window in her turn now, evening light, and let him stand beside her, his arm around her. Sometimes he would be a child and let his head rest on her shoulder.

He has such a heavy head, she thought. But her head was large too, generous with thought and remembering.

And then she would let her head rest on his shoulder. Not very long, just a little while, long enough as if to say I love you too.

Mostly though they kept busy in the apartment. There was so much to do.

The thirty-eight meters had almost all been taken up.

She kept two meters for herself, right near the window, where she could sleep alone when she was annoyed at him or bored with him. Most nights they slept together. But it is good to have space of one's own.

She kept another three meters for her school work, desk and chair and slim bookcase wedged against the wall and overflowing up the wall towards the distant ceiling. So much work for her, at the desk and in the books.

So much work for her too talking to him, listening at him. Then he might suddenly need her to jump up from whatever she was doing so she could hold his book open in front of him while he practiced a posture of ancient Peruvian Inca yoga that was described in the book, or else he needed, suddenly, right now and not a moment later, to smell her hair, to smell the roots of her hair, where (he said) her hair grows out of thinking, I love your thinking.

## 5

They had brought all kinds of things into the apartment from the outside world. Once you get a big thing through the door, it can fit in surprisingly small space — that's what they discovered.

Saturdays they would spend wandering around, finding things for their apartment. The thirty-three meters left unoccupied seemed by now a vast desert, full of challenge.

Several months had passed, and not once had he suggested that he might leave, or get a place of his own, or a life of his own, or go back to his own country, never once, after several months this is what they had in the apartment:

One meter contained the whole of Mount Kilimanjaro, which came from Africa. It was so high that there was always snow on top of it, right up almost touching the ceiling. When it got hot and stuffy in the apartment, they would climb high up the gentle slopes of the mountain till they found a cool grotto, where lush vegetation welcomed them, and they listened to the springs gurgling down into basalt basins and leopards coughing in the woods, and they watched cute little hyraxes tumbling and playing and nibbling seeds.

Right next to that mountain, a square meter contained a small meadow on the slopes of the Donnersberg, not far from the Rhine. On it a few dozen cows, slim but big-uddered, wandered, sunlight warming their café-au-lait colored pelts. These cows provided them with fresh milk for their coffee and cereal, with enough left over to make quark and soft white cheese.

They spent (or wasted, she sometimes thought) two whole meters on Lake Mono, the third oldest lake on the planet Earth, it is said. They brought it from California. Deep and very blue, it was extremely salty, good for floating, but the rim of the lake was pure white with sun-dried salts. The waters were healing, perhaps, but they were not especially refreshing.

So they spent another meter on an intimate Alpine lake they ordered from the Graubünden. But that turned out to be too cold for all but the hottest days of August when even the crowded street outside was struck dumb by the sun. Then the lake would please them. At other times, they mostly liked it for the thunderstorms that massed above it so often, and blazed with lightning. On serene afternoons, gulls would float over it, very small and far away, like the gulls in his book over some lake back in Sweden.

One chaste, even austere, meter was devoted to the several volumes of the great Littré dictionary, stacked up, and on it she would sometimes perch for hours, thinking, dreaming often of her own homeland and her distant friends. It would be months still before she could go home.

In the meantime, they were together. How long would they be together? What does that mean? He had his two meters, she had her five meters, and that's what the world is like.

—We are born alone and we die alone. She said that to him once, severely, she forgot why she said it, but it was true. It is true.

But they seemed to be now, and seemed to be together, and lived in this apartment where all kinds of things had been gathered. It is a pleasure to live in a world like this.



Because they had lots of things and circumstances, things and textures to live with. This is what they had accumulated so far, each thing on its own square meter or maybe a little more:

1. A Blaupunkt table-model radio from 1955, with a sleek rank of plastic pushbuttons and huge plastic knobs that by now had taken on the look of old ivory and were good to feel. It made sound still, but they quarreled about what music was to listen to, and he would begin to lecture on the evils of this and the virtues of that. Mostly they used it to listen to the news, he didn't understand the language all that well, and then she'd have to explain to him what they'd just heard.

2. An armchair they had found in the street. He had, for sanitary reasons, sprayed it with a powerful disinfectant, of which it still smelled so strongly that nobody liked to sit in it. Still, it was nice to drop full shopping bags on, or pile books up on, or toss clothes when you took them off.

3. A bath-tub occupied two of the meters. It had feet in the shape of lion claws, but a peculiar lion, because the feet at one end of the tub pointed in one direction, while the feet at the other pointed in the other. With all the lakes in the room, it didn't get used much for baths, but it was an excellent space for storing clothes, since they didn't have to be folded, hence didn't get wrinkled.

4. A tobacco stand, whose central storage area was lined with copper. Neither of them smoked. The stand had a cactus living on it that never got watered and never died.

5. A metal-stamping factory that made economy-grade scissors and shears from sheet metal. The workmen were all Japanese, and the bouncy jive of that emphatic language could be heard all day long in that part of the room.

6. A small railroad town from Pennsylvania, on the shore of the Delaware River, one elbow of which—shallow, slow, green with summer—can be seen just at the edge of the town. On the one street, a train is idling, taking on water and dropping off two worried-looking passengers. No one has come to meet them at the station. In a little diner, a girl is ordering pancakes, but you have to bend very low to hear her, so shy is she that her voice is low, if musical.

7. A beech tree.

8. A little wild boar shoat, his furry back still dappled with the pale fawn-spots of very young swine. He took up very little space, though some space, wherever it was. But it tended to move around quite a lot, the way younger animals do, even though it normally tended to gravitate back to the tree, from which beechnuts would presently begin to fall.

9. A little country church from Bavaria. Its steeple, onion-bulbous at the base, narrowed to a very pointy summit, tipped with a simple Latin cross like the protective button on an *épée*—the cross kept him and her from scratching themselves on the sharp spire.

10. An old waterless fountain from Sicily. The stone was rust-stained and crumbly, and the stonework looked as if it had been made a thousand years ago by Arabs, but who can say. Waterless, in general, yes. But every once in a while, often in the middle of the night, or in a silent afternoon after love siesta, they would suddenly hear a trickle, and they would sleepily look into the fountain and see a little gush of water up, just an inch or two above the old lead pipe from which the spray once rose. Enough water would come out to cover most of the basin, then

the flow would stop. Sometimes he or she, or the two of them together, shoulder to shoulder, or even closer, hip to hip, arms around each other, would kneel at the rim of the fountain and bend forward, holding each other, and drink from the strange and sudden water, that always tasted like metal or tasted like stone, they could never decide. In the morning, sometimes the basin would still be damp to the touch.

And even so there was always room for more.