

## DAVIS SCHNEIDERMAN

### The Letter-Writing K.ampaign

Encounters in the City of K concern the skirting of kith and kin, the skulls of kilted, jocular functionaries, occasionally caught in kimonos, most often in kepi caps, bivouacked in underground bunkers and barracks, broken dignitaries with sparkless smiles and keen katamorphic responsibilities.

These minor functionaries break their duties into compact bursts of knavish corruption, sneaking kickbacks to candidates through the cold knuckles of Kublai Khan's electoral fingers. The Khan employs all constituents in the county, funds the bureaucracies—the copy editors, Klan members, Knights of the Bath, monotheistic carpenters, *corpus delectis*, concierges, lackadaisical accordionists, Kung-Fu artists, lactating yak peddlers and kangaroo keepers, cuckoo-clock artisans...and every resident of the claustrophobic city knows only too well the duties of their acknowledged, and officially-sanctioned racket.

“KK” insignias decorate the corner drug stores, arcades both classical and commercial, the electronic blips on optical keratometers, the knots of knee braces requisite on the architecture, and every single cone of molecular particle lost in the specimen clips of a KK-trademark's electron microscopes, murdered and re-created by the Khan's chemical engineers.

For everything must be marked with the correct insignia—the “KK” of creatures great and small—despite domestic or foreign creation. Once collected within the City of K’s borders, each physical construct finds itself trademarked to better serve the Great Khan’s endless kingdom. Occasional scribes and seekers protest against this aspect of the Tartar scheme as *too* controlling, not at all in the cast of the long-dead Genghis, not concurrent with his cacophonous, but never metaphysical distinctions.

As I trek over K’s macadam concourses, the effect is not unlike the containment of culture through reverse-claustrophobia. All citizens condemn themselves, through lack of acceptable recourse, to eke out their existence in pockets of boxy cubicles. Subjection to the exterior common arenas—the closed-down markets, the rustic Second Empire district, the Greek revival with windows shuttered and locked, the uncompleted skyscrapers topped with automatic kangaroo cranes and outlines of fastigated tops—presents far too horrific a track for any native to consistently shuttle themselves across.

No, all commoners and functionaries, executives and trademarkers, concern themselves only with their specific sanctum sanctorum, keeping indoors as much as they can. And this reverse-claustrophobic tendency—this dictate to check oneself into the skimpiest cracks of K, locked into the most incommensurate grips of the city like sunken moles escaping the light—finds its cause not in the indulgent tasks set forth by Kublai Khan, but from the freakish glow cast upon all structures in K by the grotesque superstructure of Tartar incorporation: a Kastle set high upon the acclivity.

The continual bustle of activity from the Kastle keeps order in the hierarchical structure of the City of K through the observance of strict protocols. My own

experience in K does nothing to corroborate the speculative scope of the grounds as ascribed by the citizenship.

The superstructure, with its outer curtain wall recognizable only in the occasional outcrop of guard tower or barbican from a background of dark, comes to the fore like shocks of electricity from thunder clouds, distracting samples of an unknowable electrical charge.

K., a citizen captured in his cubicle by a drudgery so colossal as to control all aspects of himself, is known to have been once convinced, through a combination of exhaustion and alcohol, of an ability to make out the length of one entire outer curtain wall of the Kastle, completely sculpted down to the KK crafted loopholes along the parapet. According to his exertions at walking the expanse from his outlook down in the city, he calculated the extent of the wall at over sixteen kilometers.

I conceive of these facts from various periodicals broadcast over the largely-vacant City of K. And although no citizen will explicitly accuse K. of particularizing these concepts, the noncompliance of all constituents towards his identification bespeaks volumes through negation, like the reverse-claustrophobia gripping the city of K, towards his incontestable guilt.

Cudgeled in the corner of a spectacularly constricted office, K. occupies himself at a standard KK secretarial scripting desk, scattered with the multiplex contrivances of eradication—decanters leak liquid paper, erasers blitzkrieg corrections, scissors cut expired publications, black markers opaque mistakes.

“K.areful, you dim-wit, you’ll k.ancel the work of years with those k.arelessly k.oncealed idosynk.racies...” He paper-clips corrections frantically. “I’ve k.oddled

you enough...state your k.oncern, then k.indly ak.sept my k.alculated k.ommiseration for your predik.ament, and be on your way..."

I cramp my back against the vertical frame of the cracked-rim bed and the front of the antique desk, taking notice of its interlocking, collapsible nature to keep the distinction between work and rest. The calliope of papers comes to a systematic halt, and K., his moniker carved in relief on the desk, bookended by two trademarks of the Khan— KK K. KK—casts his gaze directly at me.

"I'm already charak.teristically intrak.tably off sk.edule. Who k.alled you to this lok.ation?"

"I can't say," I say.

"I see. Dok.uments please."

Conveying my documents into his corpulent fingers, I feel the affliction of their crass ink forsake the sketch of my own digits and leech like an ancient sin to a fresh supplicant. Our covalent bond locks his naked eyes to my corporeality; sacking the landscape of my passport, K. looks less than content.

"Well, this will take some time to k.lassify and process..."

I'm struck by a mark of degradation, standing erect as K. commences to file my assembled documents into any number of the writing desk's dozens of concealed compartments. By means of a crank on one side, of which I have not taken note, K. produces a multiplex of combinations and recombinations in the desk's compartments, inoculating the distinct fractions of my documents into the slowly sinking and ever-changing configuration of panels, drawers, and cabinets.

I count the moments expectantly, in dumb shock at the complexity of this desk, more an exotic configuration than casual scribbling surface, and also at the disbelief that these certificates and documents, so customary to me as to be

components of my inner self, collapse like spectres into the colon of this miscreation, which so far as I can conceivably know in my current exposed state, may never see fit to expel them.

“You k.an plainly see the energy ek.spende.d on your k.ase...and I am not even your k.ase officer. From the look.s of you, I k.an’t be k.onfident you even have one. Yet, it is part of my sworn duties as a funk.tionary of the City of K., k.oncerned with k.ombattin.g the introduk.tion of the ‘K.,’ to direk.t all diplomatik. agents who k.ross my track..”

K., upon completion, closes the open drawers, jerks the control crank once again, and sends the stalks of exposed documents scurrying into darkness. Together, we feed upon the incandescent opacity fluctuating not through a window pane (none grace the cubicle) but through heat ducts encrusting the ceiling, conveying artificial daylight in spasms from some distant corridor. K. speculates with bureaucratic reserve, his pens and calligraphy implements at rest, the writing desk making residual cracks deep beneath an oaken finish.

“I’m attempting to balance my k.arma out,” K. says in seeming explanation for his actions, “like starch to sugar, it’s all converting to K.ismet. And I’ve always hated the Turk.s...”

I think of laughter, still, standing erect before this servant of the Khan, no longer expecting my documents to reoccur in the room, convinced of K.’s faith in his own techniques. “Will I have safe passage towards Xanadu...? My concerns in the capital city are crucial...” I tack on an uncertain caveat, “and involve the Great Khan directly.”

K.’s expression converts from apparent non-excitability to abject complicity, a skinny *crink* of nose and shadow, nearly imperceptible, but unmistakably extant to my

trained assassin eye. His jaw cracks lightly as reconnaissance for what will no doubt be a significant speech...

“I have work.ed in this City of K., for K.ing K.ublai K.han, k.areful to k.Keep K.ierkagaard and K.ant from k.onfronting one another, k.oncerned with k.astration, K.aballah, and the K.oran, ak.septing that magik. ak.septs our imperfek.tions, just as we must k.apitulate to its silent presk.riptions. You may speak. highly of this k.nnowledge, if ask.ed, and have even felt k.ornered by the k.lasp you k.laim it holds over us all...but k.now you this, what has gone unmark.ed k.annot k.eep so k.ontinually. The K.han’s ‘KK’ may be k.omplicit in the k.onsolidation of this ak.tuality, but ak.tually, it’s only bek.ause of your people’s introduk.tion of the ‘K.’ k.alling attention not to the k.onsolidation, which remains an irrevok.able ak.tuality, but to the false k.onflict k.reated between the binary sk.ema...”

Oh k.rap.

The craft of my stomach curves and swells with the cadence of K.. “This sk.ema? The K.han ak.septs it, the ‘K.’?”

“Who k.an say what K.ublai K.han does or does not ak.sept? No one here k.an see the Mongoloid, nor k.arry a desk.ription of his k.haracter, for we k.annot even k.onceive of the City of K’s lok.al outk.rop, the K.astle which I am said to have walk.ed off in k.ilometers one alk.oholic evening. How then, are we to k.all the K.han as one of our k.in? You are slowly k.aught in the k.lutches of these things...”

“Surely some funk.tionary must have k.ontacted him, or at least the K.astle, some time?”

“Ak.! Look. around you, tak.e in my k.ubicle. I have not always been K.. Once, I was k.alled by another monik.er, but I k.an no longer rek.all. Once the first ‘K.’s’ began to trick.le into the K.han’s empire, the City of K., within the k.ounty of

K. and the K.ountry of K. became the k.learinghouse for these mark.s, and k.ontrary to the ‘K.K.’ trademark.ing projek.ts, the elimination of the ‘K.’s’ k.aused new posts to k.ome alive.”

“Thy k.ingdom k.ome?”

“Ek.sactly! I was given this k.ubicle, which I have never since ek.sited, and was k.alled to k.orrall the ‘K.’s’ from ek.stending over the k.ountryside.”

“Your suk.sess seems obstruk.ted...if I may say so...”

“How do you come to be so impolitik.?” says Direk.tor K., shaking the cap, where any other funk.tionary may well have shak.en the entire pen. “So my suk.sess isn’t ek.stant enough for you? A gate-k.rasher from the outside! A well-dressed k.rank from another k.ountry! An idiotik. assassin who no doubt k.onjectures that his diplomatik. status will protek.t him from the k.onsequences of his insults...”

“I’m sorry, Herr Direk.tor K., I meant no disrespek.t...” K. searches the k.orners of his kubik.le as if others to whom I owe apology are k.ept watching in shadow.

K. neglek.ts these invisible k.ounterparts as soon as I seem to ack.nowledge them. The pen k.ap k.ontinues its slow wave. “It’s nothing...no...forgive me. You k.annot be ek.spected to know the prek.ariousness of your k.ondition. How k.ould you, being an ek.straterrestrial being?”

“I k.ould not...” Tek.stiles pok.ing from the k.orona of the direk.tor’s k.ollapsible bed k.lap the k.urrents of air circk.ulating from the duk.ts, and mimik. lightly, as the entire bed k.lamps on my back., an additional shock. of k.omplexity in the k.ube.

“You’ve k.ome to me for help, and here I am k.ajoling you into attak.s and k.onvulsion. Let me ek.splain...” Direk.tor K. nods k.onfidently around the room,

k.ausing, k.ryptically, the light from the outside k.orridor to ink.rease through the vent.

“The lack. of suk.sess, as you k.all it, is due not so much to the vast amount of ‘K.s’ sent in through the diplomatik. traffik., but from the ek.sertion placed upon the other k.aracters in the system—most notably, the k.ansellation of the soft ‘c’ in both single ‘c’ and double ‘cc’ struk.tures, and replacement by ‘s.’ As in ‘suk.sess.’ And, of course, the addition of ‘s’ as a k.aveat after ‘k.’ in k.onstructions with ‘x’...”

“As in ek.splain.”

“Yes. The k.omposite effek.t of the ‘K.’ period’s introduk.tion is the rise of the ‘s.’ In one k.ornor a suk.sessful k.onsolidation device, in another, an ek.stra unnesessary k.aracter.”

By now, in relok.ating my body from the descending advance of the k.ollapsible bed, the iron-framed struk.ture has tak.en to the writing-desk as its obstak.le, and a sign for the direk.tor, judging from his ek.shalation of ok.sygen in k.ollosal relief, to once again k.rank the writing desk.’s k.ompartments. And while the hope of k.atching a glance at any one of my absent dok.uments and passports seems an unlik.ely wish, I swear that stick.ing from one of the many k.rack.s in the k.abinets are papers that k.ould just as easily be my own as those k.oncerning matters entirely alien to my k.urrent predik.ament.

K.’s k.ranking gains a furious rank.or, and the writing desk. begins to move and mak.e way for the bed by k.losing into the k.orrugated floorboards. Soon, the bed is set.

“Sit down,” says K. “I get so ek.shausted these days...”

I k.an no longer k.onseive of dissent.

Our k.ongress is awk.ward, inek.spert, and I k.an feel the change as it ok.k.urs. It is the k.ansellation, just as Direk.tor K. predik.ted, of other k.arak.ters in the system. We ek.splore our sk.ripting hands and then k.raft ark.ane messages on the nak.ed ek.spanses of bodies k.onjoining us. Mine ak.sented with typewriter ink., his k.old and k.rawling with the enk.umberance of the Sity's bureauk.rasy. "Other phonemes disk.onek.t; there is nothing to sensure," K. whispers.

The k.rak.s of my palms fill with k.um. K's? Mine? I k.annot make the nessesary distink.tion. K. buk.les the seremonial k.lothing of his station. "Nothing is ak.tual, everything is k.onseivable."

Still visk.ous, another k.rank ek.sposes the k.onscientiously k.ept sentral k.orridor, swept k.lean twice every syk.le by emissaries of the spesifik funk.shonaries sentral to the k.orridor. K. passes one with a nervous smile, and k.arries me along the sirk.uit of k.orridores ever ek.spanding in sk.ope as we wander.

I take ak.ount of k.ountless doors and hatches, wik.ets and plank.ways, sirk.umventing our original k.orridor and sek.tioning off into other direk.tions. I ek.splore these k.wik.ly, K. k.onduk.ting us without k.aution over the k.auseways. Dessending into the k.atacombs, or seemingly so from the dek.livity of the plank.ing, I k.an't help but marvel at an infrastruk.ture so k.omplek.s as to be k.ompletely indissernible to an outsider. After k.onsiderable wear to my k.onfiguration, sirk.umstantial and rotten, our bodies are once again ek.sposed to the ek.sternal air. And oh, what ak.tivity! We dessended not at all.

Inside the outer k.urtnain wall of the K.astle, past outwork.s and k.asemates and barbik.ans and k.eeps, we stand beneath the sensational battlements of the still

inak.sessible k.onstruk.t, but instead what k.arma, what wonder? There, upon the embank.ment, the rok.et!

“Esk.ape,” sings K., and jerk.s his arms ek.statik.ally, frenetik.ally at the rok.et’s k.ok.pit. His k.iss punk.tures the seal of my lips.

Tak.e off.

The perspek.tive from inside the rok.et after k.ommencing thrust, after esk.ape from the Sity of K.’s highest ek.stant projek.tions, k.atches the K.astle’s k.olossal wall ek.stending over the k.ountryside, running down the ak.k.livity and interlock.ing with every struk.ture in the Sity from the humblest shak. to the most boundless mak.rok.osm. A k.osmic artery k.aught by the visk.ous k.louds.

And stak.ed at the Sity’s magnetic senter, work.ing furiously, unseasingly, on his funk.shionary projek.t, k.ontinues K., k.ollapsing the k.ompartments of my unsertain sk.eleton., k.allously sirk.umrotating his mik.rosk.opik. k.rank.