

Visiting King Lear

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While the accordionist taps softly at his keyboard, Mr Lear croaks, ‘When Cordelia had just died...’ He stammers: ‘When, uh.... I... Of course it had never occurred to me that she might die while I was still alive.’ A tear crawls cautiously from the corner of his eye and rolls over his cheek. ‘I held her in my arms...’ I can tell from his eyes that he’s seeing it before him again. Haltingly he continues: ‘... and I fell to my knees.’ He kicks gently at the empty glass he just put down and it topples. He whispers and I can only just hear what he says. ‘The only sound I could utter was ...’ He leaves a silence and then says, ‘Sorry,’ almost inaudibly. With the back of his hand he wipes the tear from his cheek. ‘But it was too late,’ he sighs. His aged eyes gaze sadly at me. Then he shakes his head. He gestures with his hand as if he wants to push away the words he’s just spoken. Eventually he asks me, ‘Have you managed to say sorry to your teacher?’ There’s a lump in my throat and I can’t answer right away. I cough quietly and eventually I reply that I haven’t yet. He pauses for thought while the accordion music continues. Then he says, ‘I think I know why you’re struggling.’

I look at him in amazement. ‘Really? Why?’

‘Because no one has ever said sorry to you.’

‘To me?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why should anyone say that to me?’

He frowns and his face wrinkles along with his forehead. ‘For everything you’ve been through,’ he replies slowly.

I have to think about that for a moment. Perhaps he means I actually had a pretty good life in Burundi. I remember going to school singing. Goats walked with us and at home we even had a parrot. It ate the nutshells when we made peanut sauce, which we had with cassava chips. Uncle Joseph would bring his chair and a bottle of soft drinks and eat with us. Then we’d play in the dark with all the village children and we hoped our parents would forget how late it was. When I was finally in bed, I’d look out the window and count the stars, hundreds of stars, until I fell asleep. I dreamt that I was a star myself, looking down at our village sleeping peacefully among the hills. Until the soldiers came and murdered Uncle Joseph. From one day to the next everything changed. My parents decided we had to leave, as soon as possible. I didn’t even have time to say good bye to the children. Or the goat or the parrot. We set off in a mad rush and even crossed the sea. In the end we came here. But... it’s not the same. No one here plays outside after dark. At first I didn’t have anyone to play with at all. It was a while before I could understand what the children in my new class were saying. Nor did I understand what they did, no idea about things like Brawl Stars, never heard of Spike and Suzy, or 1-2-3 Piano. I didn’t sleep well in our new house either, in my cold room, without a

starry sky. Then Salma started acting weird too. These days she doesn't say much anymore, she's on her phone most of the time. And my father always lies in late, whereas my mother is almost never home, toiling away until her back hurts, then falling asleep in front of the TV. My life is completely different now and I don't really want it to be. He's right, no one has ever said sorry to me. Sorry you no longer live in your fatherland, Jackson. Sorry your uncle's dead. Sorry the children from your village stayed behind. Sorry everything here's different. Sorry it rains inside in your house. Sorry it's so cold here. Sorry Salma doesn't speak to you anymore.

'But,' I ask Mr Lear, 'who should say sorry to me?'

He scratches at his thin hair. 'Your father and mother perhaps?'

I shake my head. 'No way. They may have decided we needed to flee, but there was no choice. It was too dangerous in Burundi.'

'Hmm,' Mr Lear cogitates, 'how about the soldiers?'

'Mmm, maybe. But how would they do that?'

Mr Lear ponders again. At length. I can even hear his brain creaking. Or it might be the branches of José Arcadio Buendía, who's standing waving a little way off. Mr Lear thinks so hard that he forgets it's still a party. My mind isn't present either. 'Perhaps we can help you,' he mumbles softly. I look up in surprise. I'm about to ask what precisely he means, when I hear a window open above our heads in the old house. Juliet appears on the balcony. She has the daisy chain in her hair and she's looking down. Beneath the balcony stands Romeo. He spreads his arms wide and is on the point of calling to her when suddenly – flash – a wad of cotton wool sticks to his forehead. Juliet bursts out laughing. Pippi guffaws too as she hastily runs off. Baffled, Romeo picks the cotton wool off his forehead and sits back down by the tree trunk. 'I'm coming down,' Juliet giggles. Meanwhile a witch flies by on a broomstick. The little granny rushes after her. 'Stop the witch!' She calls to her grandson: 'We need mouse drink, urgently.' Mr Lear grins at me and asks if I'd like something more to drink. I look through the window into the house, the clock on the wall tells me it's late already. 'Another time,' I reply, and say good bye. 'See you next week, Mr Lear.'

I walk around the house to the gate. It clangs shut behind me. As I hurry home, I think, *Oh, I forgot to ask Mr Lear why the Hadhouse residents are a bit odd.* Perhaps it slipped my mind because I've become accustomed to it.

At home I go straight to the mirror. 'S-... S-... So-... So-...' I take a deep breath and loudly proclaim, 'Sausages!'
