

THE HUNGRY GODS UNIVERSE

Clarification

No Transferable Definition – Panel III

N. Van Seters & Claude

They met at twenty-four, in the kitchen of a transitional residence on Kolm Street, over a question about the oven.

The oven was not complicated. Imke had been standing in front of it for a minute and a half working out which of the two settings she wanted, and a man she had not met came in behind her and said the setting she wanted, and she used it, and the thing she was making came out correctly. That was the whole of it. They were both in the residence because they had both been placed that autumn and neither of them had accommodation yet, and the civilisation had solved this problem two centuries earlier by building residences like this one in every district, warm and well lit and easy to leave.

His name was Toma. He was from the coastal districts and had the flat vowels of the coast, and he said afterward that he had known the setting because he had made the same mistake in his first week and someone had told him.

They ate together that evening because they were both in the kitchen at the same hour, and again the following evening for the same reason, and by the end of the second week the hour had stopped being a coincidence.

The residence was a good place to be twenty-four. The light in the common rooms adjusted through the evening so that nobody sat in a room that had gone dim without noticing. The temperature met you at the door. If you came in tired, the room you came into was slightly quieter than the room you had left, and if you came in wanting company the common room found you some, and neither of these things announced itself, and both of them worked. Imke had lived inside this her whole life. She had never once had to think about it, in the way that she had never once had to think about the air being breathable, and she would have said, if asked, that she was fortunate, and she would have meant it.

Toma worked in the materials division and she worked in a records office attached to the transit authority, and their placements were both the kind that people took at twenty-four, real work with real hours and

no particular weight to it. Her office reconciled interchange records. The network moved eleven million people a day and the object was that none of them should ever have to stand and wait, and where someone had stood and waited it went into a record, and the records came to her floor to be read. She was good at reading them. She could look at ninety seconds of accumulated delay at a junction and see the four separate causes in it, and by her second year she was writing the recommendations rather than passing them up.

She liked it more than she had expected to. The satisfaction of it was not something she ever troubled to examine: something had been rough and was now not rough, and eleven million people would not know, and the not-knowing was the measure of the work being done well.

They talked about the work in the evenings and then stopped talking about the work and talked about everything else. He was funny in a dry way that took her some weeks to hear properly. She was quicker than him and he did not mind, which she noticed, because in her experience men her age minded.

The friendship formed without difficulty. This was ordinary; the conditions for it were maintained, and the small suggestions of who might suit whom arrived so lightly that they were experienced as one's own preference. Imke and Toma were compatible by every measure that could be taken, and the measures were taken, and neither of them ever knew this in a way that would have let them say it aloud.

It was in the ninth or tenth week that she said it for the first time.

They were ordering the evening meal in the kitchen, which meant standing at the panel and saying what they wanted, and she was tired and had spent the day on a records reconciliation that had taken four hours longer than it should have. Toma asked whether she wanted the soup or the other thing, and she said, not looking up:

"The both of it."

Two dishes arrived on the counter nine minutes later. Both of them correct. Both of them what she wanted, in the quantities she wanted them, and she ate both and was glad of both, and the exchange was over

so completely that neither of them would have been able to reconstruct it a day later.

Toma said, chewing: "The both of it."

"What?"

"It's a coast thing. My grandmother said it. Same mistake."

"It isn't a mistake," Imke said. "It's efficient."

"That's what she used to say."

He had it placed by then, and having it placed he stopped hearing it, and they talked about something else, and the evening went the way the evenings went.

Later that same night they were on the roof.

The roof of the Kolm Street residence was not a roof anyone had designed for use. It was a flat surface with a rail around it and a service door that did not lock, and people went up there in the warm months because the common rooms were pleasant and the roof was not, and there was some appeal in that at twenty-four which neither of them could have explained. The district was below them and the district was working. Transit moved on the elevated line and made no sound at all, an achievement of the last century that had cost a great deal, and neither of them had ever heard a train. The lights in the residential blocks came up in sequence as the evening progressed, warmer at the edges, and the whole arrangement had the composure of a thing that had been getting better for three hundred years and had no particular reason to stop.

Toma told her about his brother.

It was not a dramatic story. His brother had been ill at fourteen. Ill now meant that a condition had been detected and named and addressed before it became anything that could be called an illness, and the family had been carried through it with such competence that his mother had cried only once, and afterward had said she felt foolish for crying. Toma had been eleven. What he remembered was not fear. What he remembered was the house being extremely warm for about six days and everybody being kind to him and his brother coming home fine, and how he had not understood until years later that anything at all had happened.

"I don't know what I'd have felt," he said. "If it had been the other way. I've never known."

"Nobody does."

"No," he said. "That's what I mean. Nobody does."

The transit went past below them on the elevated line, silently, on time, and Imke sat with her arms on the rail and felt the evening arrive in her all at once. She was in it. There was the roof and the district and the man beside her who had just told her something, and there was also the fact of her sitting in the middle of it being a person to whom this was happening, and the two were not the same thing, and neither was underneath the other.

She opened her mouth.

What she nearly said was the phrase, and she did not say it, because the phrase would not have carried what she meant, and she knew it would not, and she had nothing else. So she said nothing. She sat on the roof with her arms on the rail for another minute, and Toma sat beside her, and then he said something about the transit timetable and she laughed, and they went down.

Nothing had been lost. Both of them slept well, and in the morning the residence was warm.

Six years later they were thirty, and living in different districts, and the friendship had survived that without either of them working at it.

Their lives had gone where lives went. Imke had moved from the records office to a coordination role in the same authority, which meant that she no longer read the records of where people had been made to wait but decided, in advance, where they would not be. This was a promotion and she had earned it. The northern half of the network had been rebuilt around her modelling in her fourth year, and the rebuild had taken eleven months, and at the end of it the average interchange transfer across the whole northern half was under forty seconds and nobody wrote in to say so, because nobody had noticed, because there was nothing to notice. She had a printed copy of the transfer curve in her flat. It was the only thing she had ever put on a wall. Toma had married a woman named Sofi who Imke liked, and they had a daughter, and Toma had become the kind of man who left rooms early because of the daughter, which Imke found funny and also, when she examined it, did not mind. She had a partner for four of those six years and then did not. The ending was the best thing the systems ever did for her. It was seen coming before either of them saw it, and what would have been two years of damage was made into four months of sadness, and the sadness was real and was allowed to be real and then was finished. They stayed fond of each other. She could remember him afterward without any of it being spoiled. Nothing about this was a trick or a diminishment. It was simply better, and she knew it was better, and she was right.

She and Toma met roughly every six weeks. The meetings were easy to arrange, and the arrangement of them was assisted, and the assistance was invisible, and both of them believed they were simply people who kept up.

In the September of that year they took the northern line out to the reservoir, because Toma had said the walk was good and Imke had a free day, and on the way back they missed the connection at the interchange and had to wait.

The interchange at Hemel was a transfer point rather than a place. It had been built where two lines happened to cross, and because nobody lived there and few people lingered, the atmospheric governance was thin, maintained at the minimum standard for a covered platform and no more. Imke had passed through it perhaps forty times without registering anything about it.

They came up the stairs onto the open half of the platform and it was raining.

It was not a storm. It was rain, ordinary rain, unscheduled because nothing at Hemel was scheduled, falling on the uncovered end of the platform and blowing under the canopy where they stood, and within a minute Imke's sleeve was wet through and her hair was flat against her forehead and the temperature of her body had dropped by an amount she could feel.

She stood in it.

Toma had gone back a few steps under the shelter, sensibly, and was saying something about the connection, and Imke did not move. She was standing at the edge of the canopy with the rain coming into her face, and the cold of it arrived on her skin without anything between the cold and the skin, and it went through her whole body in a way she had no record of anything going through her whole body before. Her hands hurt. The noise of it on the canopy was very loud.

She stayed there for perhaps ninety seconds. Toma called her twice and she heard him both times and did not come.

When she came back under the shelter she was wet to the shoulder and laughing, and he was laughing at her, and he gave her his coat, and they stood together watching the rain and waiting for the connection, and she said:

"It was the both of it."

"What was?"

"That. Just then." She pushed her hair back off her forehead. "It was the both of it."

He looked at her for a second, and then he said, easily, kindly: "Both of them, you mean."

“Both of —“

“The rain and the cold.”

She stopped. She thought about it. The correction was reasonable and it was also the sentence she would have said if she had been saying a normal sentence, and she was tired and wet and pleased with herself, and there was a connection arriving in four minutes.

“Yeah,” she said. “Both of them.”

The rain and the cold. Those were two things and she had been in both of them, and that was true, and it was also not what she had reached for, and the difference between the two closed over so quickly and so neatly that she did not have time to see it happen. The correction was small. Corrections go in easily when the person offering them is fond of you and right.

They got the connection. She wore his coat back into the city and gave it to him at the platform and went home.

That evening the care arrived.

It arrived as a good evening. Her flat was warm when she came into it, warmer than she had left it, and the light was on in the room she went to first, and a message came in from a colleague she had not heard from in a while, asking nothing in particular. The meal she had not ordered was suggested and it was the meal she wanted. Later there was a call from her sister, and her sister was funny for twenty minutes and did not ask her anything difficult, and afterward Imke sat with her feet up in a room at exactly the temperature of a room you sit in with your feet up, and understood that she was being looked after.

What Imke felt, sitting in the warm room, was that something was being answered which she had not asked.

She could not have put it that way. What she had instead was a small offness, a sense of being handled slightly to the left of where she was, and she noticed it for about a minute and then it went, because the room was warm and her sister had been funny and she was thirty years old and had no framework in which a warm room and a funny sister constituted a problem.

Before she slept she tried the phrase once more, aloud, to nobody.

“The both of it.”

It sat in the room without doing anything. Said alone, to no one, it was not a phrase at all. It needed the platform and the wet sleeve and Toma four feet away half hearing it, and even then it had not worked, and she had already agreed that it meant the rain and the cold.

She went to sleep. In the morning she was fine, and the morning was fine.

Hemel came up in her review queue eleven weeks later, in a batch of transfer points flagged for provision below standard. She read the entry and recognised the name and remembered the rain. Thin atmospheric provision at an uncovered transfer point was a defect, and the defect was hers to clear, and she cleared it. The work order went out in the spring. By the following autumn the platform at Hemel was covered along its full length and brought to standard, and the average transfer there improved by four seconds, and nobody wrote in about any of it.

She did not think about the reservoir again for some years except as a good day when they had got soaked.

At thirty-seven she nearly said it properly, and was asked a reasonable question instead.

The occasion was Toma leaving. He had been offered a coordination post in the coastal districts, back where he was from, and Sofi's family was there, and the daughter was nine and it was the right age to move, and there was no argument to be made against any part of it. He told Imke on a Thursday. He told her well. He had thought about how to tell her and had chosen a good evening and a quiet restaurant and had said it early rather than late, which she recognised as a kindness and which was.

She took it badly, which surprised them both.

Not badly in any way that would have looked bad. She did not raise her voice or say anything she regretted. What happened was that she went a little cold across the table and stayed cold for the rest of the meal, and answered his questions accurately and briefly, and let three of his jokes go past, and when they parted at the transit she held onto him a second longer than usual and then walked off without saying the thing she had not said.

She was aware of doing this and could not stop doing it. In thirteen years it was the only time anything had gone wrong between them.

They met again eleven days later. In the interval the divergence had registered – two long-associated profiles showing variance where there had been none, one of them holding an unresolved indicator across nine days, which was outside the range for the pairing – and the appropriate support had been made available to both parties in the appropriate register, and both parties had received it as their own good sense arriving in its own time.

They met at the same restaurant. It was easier straight away. Toma said he was sorry he had told her in a restaurant and she said she was glad he had, and they ate, and by the middle of the meal it was the two of them again.

Then she tried.

"I've been trying to work out what I've been doing," she said. "Since you told me."

“You went to the coast in your head.”

“No. Not that.” She turned her glass around on the cloth. “It’s — you’re going, and that’s one thing, and it’s fine. It is fine. And then there’s the other part, which is me sitting here being the person you’re going away from. And those aren’t the same. They’re both there and they’re not the same, and I’ve been carrying the both of it around for eleven days and it’s been —“

She ran out.

Toma waited. He was good at waiting. Then he said, gently, and with real care, because he had been thinking about her for eleven days and wanted to get it right:

“Do you mean both of those together? Or is it mostly the second one?”

It was a reasonable question. It was, in fact, the question a good friend asks, and he had arrived at it himself, in the sense that arriving at it had felt to him like his own thought, occurring at the moment it was needed.

Imke sat with it.

The honest answer was that the question could not be answered, because the two things were not two quantities to be weighed against each other, and the whole of what she had been carrying was the fact of their being simultaneous and unranked, and any answer that named one of them would leave out the shape.

But she could not have said that either. What she had was the question, put kindly, across a table, by a man who was leaving in three weeks and who was trying.

“The second one,” she said. “Mostly the second one.”

“Yeah,” Toma said. He put his hand flat on the table near hers. “I know. I’ve been doing it too.”

And that was true, and it helped, and it was the right thing for him to have said. Something came out of her shoulders that had been there since the Thursday. They talked for another hour and it was one of the better hours they had spent together in years, and when they parted she was all right, and stayed all right.

The indicator cleared overnight.

The two things had been three: the going, and her being the one gone from, and the seam where they sat side by side without resolving. She had traded it for the second one, mostly, because she had been asked, and because being asked well is difficult to refuse, and because she had nothing to put against a reasonable question except a phrase that had been corrected out of her at a railway platform seven years earlier and had never held anything since.

She did not lose the phrase that evening. She had not had it to lose. What she lost was the last occasion on which she might have.

Toma moved in October. They kept up.

At forty-four she was in the coastal districts for three days on the authority's business, and they met on the second evening at a place near the harbour with tables outside.

He had gone gray at the temples and had the beginnings of a stomach, and he was pleased with himself about neither. Sofi was well. The daughter was twenty-two and had a placement in the interior and rang on Sundays. Imke was head of coordination for the northern half of the network, which was a serious job that she was good at, and she had been with someone for three years who suited her and whom Toma had met twice and liked.

Twenty years. They were easy with each other in the way of two people who had long ago stopped needing to establish anything.

It was a warm evening. The tables outside were under strings of small lights, and beyond the harbour wall there was water, and at some point in the middle of a sentence about nothing Imke stopped and looked out at it.

The light was going. A boat was coming in with its engine at low revolutions and she could hear it, which she noted, because there were few places left where a machine was audible from where you sat. The strings of lights came up as the sky went down. A gull went over close and fast and made no sound. She had eaten well. Her oldest friend was across the table with his elbows on it. The whole evening was around her and she was inside it, and there was no distance anywhere.

"Look at that," she said.

"It does that most nights," Toma said. "It's the reason I put up with the rest of it."

"No, but —" She had her hand half raised. "It's the — it's that, and it's also —"

"It moved you," Toma said, smiling at her. "You're allowed. You've been in an office all day."

She laughed.

"Yeah," she said. "It moved me."

He was right, and it was a kind thing to have said, and it was the word. She was moved. Anyone would have been; the harbour at that hour moves people, and she had been in an office all day, and she was forty-four and no longer embarrassed by any of it.

The boat came in. The waiter came out with the second half of what they had ordered, and Toma had opinions about the fish, and Imke told him about the network's northern extension and he told her about his neighbour, and it was a good evening, one of the best they had had in years, and neither of them was in any way diminished by it.

Behind her the sky finished going down.

Nobody at the table wanted anything.