

Robert Reed: Two Sams

I emerge from that low hot savage jungle to discover a tiny village inhabited by a tiny people. Their only clothing is the native red dirt and the occasional skin of some brutalized animal. Without exception, they seem stunted by an impoverished diet. Their faces are wide and their blue-black eyes are huge and dull, and beneath their dirt is a yellowish skin hinting at sick livers and a wealth of parasites. But they farm, if only with fire and stone axes. And their huts, while simple, betray a working knowledge of knots and the art of weaving. When I look past their hunger and that enormous ignorance, I see a tiny light. The flickering that every great blaze must have at its inception. Plainly, they have never seen the likes of me before. I am wearing golden robes and jeweled sandals. I tower over their wide-eyed faces, showing them perfect teeth and a wise and patient smile. In their own half-born language, I tell them, I have come from heaven to make you a people. A nation. A civilization with no equal anywhere. I tell them, My name is Sam. Sam, the Strong. Then with a voice like thunder, I roar, Kneel to me! Now! Kneel!

The girl is prettier than anyone in class. Yet, miraculously, she seems interested in me. She sits next to me and flirts, earning warning stares from our calculus professor. She likes me enough to tease me about being spacey. Sleepy. Or am I drunk? None of those things, I promise. Then she proposes our first date. If that's what it is. Studying for our mid-term in the library. Her flirting is constant and infectious, and fun. I'm the one who suggests coffee at one of the all-night places near campus. And with a nervous little voice, I ask if she'd like to see a movie this Saturday. If you go with me, she jokes. Of course neither of us does well on the test, but after the movie and more coffee, she comes to my room and spends the night. Astonishing as that sounds. To me, nothing is more unlikely, or wondrous, than that perfect moment when I climb on top of her for the second time, her wide dark and pretty eyes staring up at me with an expression hungry and joyous, and wise in some deep way, and trusting, and against all odds, belonging to me.

I know nothing about the jungle plants. Not the edible ones, or the medicinal ones. Or which species are best avoided. I have never built any road, or a stone wall, or the simplest irrigation ditch. But what I offer is the knowledge—the timely irresistible insight—that such miracles are possible. That is what I give my earnest little people. I tell them that their crops can be improved by selective breeding. With words, I paint pictures of straight flat roads that allow farmers to move quickly and easily to their well-watered fields. If stone walls around our city sound like an extravagance, they become a treasure when the first band of raiders descend on us. And while I have never built a weapon more sophisticated than a pointed stick, I can nonetheless point my growing little nation toward a wonder weapon: It is their responsibility to find which stone makes the keenest blades, and which stick and feathers becomes the quickest shaft, and how to marry elastic wood and elastic gut, leaving you holding a longbow that can drive an arrow through any man's chest.

Her name is Sam, too. Short for Samantha. Which is a small problem for our friends, and a genuine blessing for us. We don't resemble one another physically, and we come from very different backgrounds. But we share the name. In that sense, we are already joined. We are quickly each other's best friend as well as determined lovers. When I take my Sam home for the first time, my mother knows. This is the one, she tells me. Overjoyed. Then I meet her parents—long-divorced and saddled with the usual stew of emotions. They are coldly pleasant and quick to warn us not to move too quickly. Life, they claim, is full of potential mistakes. Claymores, my future father-in-law calls them. He reminds me that I'm nothing but young. With a few beers in his belly, he tells me, Have fun. But remember this: No matter how much fun the fun is, it can vanish on you. One misstep. One claymore hiding in your path. And you lose a foot, or worse. Then you spend the rest of your life wishing that you were just one inch more cautious. One miserable inch!

Disaster strikes. My bowmen are in the northern mountains, exploring unmapped terrain, when they

stumble across a city larger than any of ours. And in disturbing ways, more advanced. These people have their own eternal strongman sitting on a wide golden throne. He sends me a message in the form of my bowmen's severed heads strung like pearls on a rope crusted with blood and brains. The legionaires carrying those heads contemptuously demand my nation's gold. And because the extortion won't end here, I have them hacked apart. Then I ready my people for war. But while I have five tidy cities of literate farmers, my foe has a genuine army with iron swords and armed horsemen and a speed of assault that leaves three of my cities conquered and my capital under siege. Which is why, before it is too late, I step back in time. A cheat, perhaps. But in the face of extinction, there is no other choice. I step back to an earlier day when I told my wide-eyed followers about the magical power of written words. But instead of writing, I tell my brightest few that we must be ready for threats worse than the occasional raider. We need our own permanent army, and harder metals than bronze. Which causes them to ask doubtfully, Are such things possible, Lord? Absolutely, I tell them. Though I don't know where to find the best ores or how the new metal can be smelted and worked. This has to be their duty, and their honor, and when my geniuses master the difficulties and hammer the first swords from the cherry-red metal, I tell them another astonishing fact: That the wild horses roaming the western plains can be captured and tamed. Tamed, and ridden. Or they can be taught—incredible as it sounds—to pull wheeled carts full of professional soldiers along our growing system of roadways.

We marry after graduation, in the autumn, and enjoy a long delicious honeymoon in Mexico—a gift from my joyous parents. My Sammie and I make love standing in the damp shadow of a great pyramid. The moment feels eternal, and perfect. But minutes later, my young wife catches my eye wandering. No, I don't gaze lustily at the bikini-clad secretaries from Chicago, or even the stout native girls—the ragged leftovers of a vanquished empire. No, what catches my gaze and holds it, without release, is the stone face of a lost god. A strong, frank face. Cruel, and all-seeing. I stare for so long that my bride yanks at my arms, and cries. My soft civilized hands cling to the god's lower lip and his great bulging eyes. Finally, very slowly, I let go of him. I blink, and sigh, gradually returning to Sam's arms and her plaintive voice. And for the first time—securely embraced by the enduring institution that is marriage—she asks, Where do you go when you leave me, darling? Where, where, where?

Eventually my people reach the mountains, and just as I hoped, we are superior to our neighbors in many ways. No, we still don't have any written language. Our farms aren't as prosperous or orderly as I would like. But the other nation's king can see that our iron is equal to his, and our gaze is fearless, and he orders his scribes fill the soft white skin of lamb with our treaty of peace. And on that bloodless day, I win everything. As part of our agreement, his scribes now teach my youngest and brightest how to create a set of twisting lines that convey abstract and wondrous ideas. Ideas that men and their women will gladly give their lives for. Then after several more centuries, when my growing nation has surrounded his little one, the king attacks me. Too late. With too little. And it is his capital that is put under siege. And it is his language that vanishes into the past. And it is his oncebrazen head that ends up perched on a cold black spear of iron erected beside my golden throne.

She isn't planned, and she is. The baby. The daughter. That child constructed half of me, half of the other Sam. Our little one stems from a series of miscalculations. A distaste for the Pill. Too much wine at dinner. Then the condoms misplaced. Jokingly, I suggest that we name her Conspiracy. And the joke becomes so familiar that we decide on something similar. Constance. Connie, for short. So much joy for us, she is, and such an unrelenting burden. But it is a burden we are born to weather. Parents by their nature are little gods, and at least in those first days, we can think of her as being entirely our own creation. So dependent. So trusting, and simple. Entertaining us with her little mistakes and inspired blunders, and both of us relishing that game where you kneel down, pretending to be small like her, calmly and firmly explaining why it is wrong to yank the cat's tail or carry scissors that way or say aloud that Uncle George smells like old fish, even though it couldn't be more true. Even though we wish we could say it ourselves.

Great people build great works, I tell my nation. Advisers and scholars and generals and drab street urchins all lean close, listening to each of my great pronouncements. I describe pyramids and grand canals and cavernous libraries that will cull genius from all the far-flung nations. Still, the precise direction of my nation remains mine to choose. But what was once a simple trail in the jungle has turned into a maze. A conundrum. Whenever I stop talking, my smiling advisors speak to me, telling me that I should move the nation this way or that way. Always in their favorite directions. And because we are growing rapidly now—a four-way rush across new lands and little oceans—I find myself listening mostly to my generals. Brave, solid men who know the value of sharp iron, and later, who come to love those little cannons that a lone man can carry and fire, killing thousands of our enemies in his minuscule life. They want to fight everyone, and I let them fight. Why not? I ask myself. Nobody seems able to stand against us. But after a century of unrelenting battling, the other nations contrive a grand alliance. They have wealth and well-paid armies, plus the capacity to learn and adapt at an astonishing rate. For the first time, distant battles are lost. Conquered cities are retaken by my enemies. Then my own cities begin to surrender to the coming horde. After a decade of endless defeat and disaster, I do the unprecedented: I leave my palace, walking the streets of my capital city. What has gone so wrong? I ask my people. But nothing is wrong, they assure me. In loud and brazen voices, they talk about slaughters to come and how we will build towers and great walls from the corpses of our foes. But I know better, regardless. Everyone here has lost sons and fathers in the endless fighting. Literacy rates are down. Lifespans and body size are shrinking. If trends hold, everything that I have built will be put to a slow death. But the new muskets are coming, my people remind me. Weapons that can kill halfway to the horizon. And all I can do is shake my head, admitting to them, and myself, People should always be wiser than their weapons.

Connie ends up as our only child. Despite our best attempts to conceive again, there is no magic. No blessing. And then some routine test finds something profoundly wrong inside my Sam, and her ovaries are removed. In time, they say. The doctor, and everyone, says it. But we still have one daughter, of course. Five years old, then suddenly ten. How does this happen so quickly? Life, I mean. And then somehow we have allowed her to become thirteen and fourteen and fifteen, and she's so full of herself and her own vast importance. Rebellion becomes the normal state inside our little family. Connie's bedroom is an armed fortification, and she is an entire guerrilla army holed up with her television and telephone and stereo. I am still a god here, but a vanquished one. Lying awake at night, unaware that my Sam is in the same state of nervous alertness, I whisper: I wish I could go back and start over and do it better this time. Then Sam asks me, Where would you go? And I'm too startled to respond. Then she says, We never should have given her her own television. That's where we started losing her. And I ask both of us, But how can we go back? Perhaps I'm hoping there's some way to cheat, some loophole that I just don't know about. But there isn't. There won't be. And then my Sam, my sleepless and worried bride, takes hold of my penis with a fond little hand, and she whispers the truest words ever: But there's always worse than what we've got, she says. There's always the bigger Claymore that we walked right past, never suspecting that it was there. . . .

I select an earlier century to make my return. And now I work to keep my people well educated, well fed, and as healthy as you can expect in a world that doesn't yet believe in germs or the magic of antibiotics. There are still wars to be fought, but only little ones that make a diplomatic point or conquer some nameless barbarians. Trade, not battle, is our lifeblood. We are an exploring nation that settles empty continents and keeps peace with our neighbors, and we constantly improve our splendid old cities. Water piped from the mountains allows millions to live beside my palace. Everywhere I turn my eyes, I see young women who would be beautiful in any realm. Tall and youthful, and unblemished, and dressed in every sort of gown. With a word, or even a quiet glance, I could bring them to my bed. In twos or threes, or more if I wished. But between me and them lies such a distance. It isn't that they are unreal or that I cannot love creatures such as them. But their reality is a small, ephemeral condition, and their

beauty is even more fleeting. I blink my eyes, and their hair grays. I put my hands over my face to think, and they turn into dust and their granddaughters. It seems that I can love them only when they are a multitude. A beautiful, nubile mass. An army of young ladies standing outside my palace gates, hoping against hope to catch some little glimpse of their great and ageless and extremely lonely king.

My job has always been small and routine, and it has never given me any genuine pleasure. But it has brought money and a livelihood, a place to go during the long days and my own circle of friends. A certain woman works in my office. She is a few years younger than me, and recently divorced, and we tell ourselves that what happens is anything but planned. But really, we've been rather single-minded about getting into this affair. After twenty years of faithful monogamy, I find myself looking into the mirror in a motel room, watching the two of us. I feel rather sad, but my reflection looks happy. Joyous, even. Why is that? One copulation is plenty for me, but my lover insists on seconds. I resort to my hands, then my mouth. And as she moves, and groans, and arches her long back, I occupy my soul with things far away and far, far more important.

The four nations eventually make their alliance, and attack. With tanks and bombers, they manage to conquer my most distant cities. But then I raise my own armies and fleets of aircraft, and the cities are retaken, and I subdue portions of their empires as spoils of war. But when I offer gracious terms of surrender, my enemies dismiss me. Ignore me. Laugh at me, even. This is total warfare; utter victory and eternal defeat are the only possible outcomes. Somehow the alliance musters the forces and the will to turn the tide against me. My great nation is suddenly in retreat. Each year is worse than the year before. Finally, in despair, I take my generals and scientists into the most secure portion of my palace, and in a godly whisper, I describe a weapon of pure destruction. No, I don't know how to build the monster, but I give my people enough clues that they can cobble it together themselves. Then with four enormous missiles, I deliver a nuclear onslaught that leaves my enemies' capitals in ruin. But even then, they don't surrender. They steal the plans, build their own missiles, and we trade cities for another thirty years, leaving our climate sick and my people dying. My only hope is to retreat into the past and fight again, and again. This last horrible war consumes me. Wherever I am, a portion of me is always fighting it. Twenty times. Fifty times. A hundred and seventeen tries until I find victory. Which seems perfectly reasonable. What's the point in being a god if you cannot find the perfect course for those who are small enough and foolish enough to believe in you?

Sam flunks her tests; the cancer has returned, in abundance. Surgeries and her chemo leave her weak and nauseous, and very nearly helpless. But what is so horrible for her, and for me, is a strange blessing, too. Connie returns to our lives after an absence of several years. In her early twenties, with an infant and no husband, she is horrified by the prospect of her mother's imminent death. Like a child, she cries. In a hundred ways, our daughter apologizes for past wrongs and absences and her bitter words and unspoken thoughts. When her mother's condition worsens, Connie lives with me at the hospital. Whispering, she tells both of us how much she loves us. And when Sam suddenly improves, Connie takes full credit, claiming that she prayed over her mother's bed and an angel came to her and said, This woman shall not be taken from you. Which is a load of pure bullshit, I'm thinking. It's nothing but a sign of my daughter's desperate need for forgiveness. She probably believes that she brought on her mother's cancer by making her life such a hell. But she's wrong, of course. The fault is entirely mine. If I just had been a more attentive, more loving husband, I keep thinking. Again, and again. And again.

There is a cure for cancer, I tell my scientists. My doctors. My priests. I don't know the means or even where to look. But if they search hard enough, with all the resources of my prosperous and victorious nation, they will find the means. I promise them. Yet fifty years of searching isn't enough time. Ten trillion pieces of gold is not enough money. In the end, I push every city and every little soul into this crucial chase, and the answer arrives after a century of unrelenting sacrifice. A grinning biologist hands me a vial filled with piss. At least that's how it looks to me. This is the cure, she promises. But I can't take the vial

with me. I have to ask, What is this yellow goo? And she tells me. It is a combination of extracts drawn from rare beetles and a deep-sea squid. What I hold in my ancient hand cannot be synthesized, she warns me. Perhaps forever, she says. And with the contempt that only a god can show, I drop the useless vial, watching it shatter on the cold marble floor.

Sam has worsened, again. Surprising everyone but me. The doctors make hopeful noises about newer, more radical methods. Devastated, Connie avoids the hospital for a horrible long week. I'm the only one sitting at Sam's bed. Who holds her desiccated dying hand. Who watches her coma-like sleep and gives her water through a bent straw. I never let my attention waver. Not for an instant. This is my only world, my only purpose. And I am rewarded by being present when her breathing strengthens suddenly, and her eyes come open, looking straight into my soul when she says, Stay. With me. Don't go to that other place, darling . . . not again. . . please—?

But I have to go. Just this one last time. Because the world has been conquered and my people are united, and happy, and after thousands of years, I owe them a heartfelt good bye. Yet to my considerable surprise, my advisors are standing before my great throne, waiting with the most astonishing news. Mistakes have been made, they claim. Our world is considerably larger than we ever imagined. Swift new ships have crossed the great oceans, bringing home monsters from unnamed continents, and delegates from half a dozen civilizations that are as powerful as us, and at least as sophisticated. There is so much more to do here, my people tell me. How can we face these new challenges without you? Stay with us, they plead. Sam, the Strong! Stay—!

By morning, my Sam acts a little bit stronger. She sits up in bed. She eats joyous bites of solid food. And the latest sips of blood show a cancer in retreat. I call our daughter with the unexpected good news. She brings her little boy. Then as the smiling grandmother holds the child against her frail body, Connie turns to me, and with an anger that has taken years to grow to this extraordinary depth, she asks me, Why do you have this other life, Father? Why do you have to hurt us all this way?

Why must you abandon us? my people implore.

To my wife and daughter, I whisper, I'm so sorry, darlings. So sorry.

To my nation, I thunder, I will do whatever I want!

Sorry isn't good enough anymore, says Sam. Says Connie. Then in a smooth, well-rehearsed chorus, they tell me, You need to decide, Sam. Once and for all. Which life are you going to live—?

As I watch in horror, my cities plunge into civil war. Famines and old plagues begin everywhere at once. My armies suddenly turn against each other. And over the din of battle, the multitude shouts at me, You must must must be fair with us!

Pick now, says my darling Sam.

Stay with us! a billion angry voices cry out.

Daddy, please? I hear. Please—?

Sam, the Weak! they chant. Sam, the Scared! Sam, the Vanquished. Sam, the Forgotten—!

You win, I tell my wife. My daughter. And a rather embarrassed nurse who wanders into this most awkward moment. This is the only world for me, I promise them, and I won't ever leave you again.

Then I go back. I step into that hot jungle clearing again. And to the sickly little people wearing nothing but skins and red dirt, I say, I am a god. Give me provisions. Now, and I will let you live. Then show me

the quickest way to the northern mountains!

Thank you, they tell me. Sam does, and Connie. They kiss me and give me long hugs, neither wanting to believe that I could lie to them now, at an important, tender moment such as this. . . .

And after a year of hard marching, I enter a valley rich with iron, and I come across another nameless village, and to the ignorant children crowding around me, I say, Kneel to me! Now! Kneel!