

Where We Lay Our Scene

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Her ticket is at will-call. She needs no help finding their seats, but Tom repeatedly cranes his neck to check the doors at the back of the hall. He likes it when she emerges from a crowd and walks directly to him. He likes to see her through the eyes of strangers; he imagines the people in the surrounding seats seeing her, noticing her beauty for the first time, and noticing when she sits down next to him. He imagines a camera lens with a range of settings from familiar to foreign, and he sees her through that lens, Ellen, his wife of sixteen years, then the exotic beauty in the eyes of the stranger a few seats down the row, and then every setting in between.

He admires the warm-up sounds radiating from the invisible orchestra pit. The play will start in roughly fifteen minutes. Art Deco torches conceal the light bulbs that illuminate the matte black walls, the red velvet curtain, the matching chairs, and the ceiling with its gold-painted woodwork. Taking their seats—some dressed for the occasion—people enter above and behind and walk past him on both sides down the sloped aisles.

She does not appear in the doorway. He has come directly from work. He is tired. Unfinished projects that he cannot forget he leaves suspended in a speechless part of his brain. Those mute thoughts make complete relaxation impossible, but they sweeten the escape. He attempts to calm himself by taking a series of slow, deep breaths.

Romeo and Juliet declares the cover of the playbill in lettering apparently meant to suggest smeared blood. The program adheres to the standard formula. He glances at the head shots of the cast and skims their bios. Juliet had played a murder victim on *Law and Order* last season. Romeo had recently completed an engagement with a traveling company of *Oklahoma!* He examines photographs from nearly twenty years ago, when this theater last staged *Romeo and Juliet*. He reads the list of donors in their tiers corresponding to dollar amounts contributed; it makes him angry that good theater cannot turn a profit, that it has to beg for money like

public radio. He skims the plot summary and turns to the director's interpretive essay. It is a sugar-coated blurb for college freshmen, but it hints at a knowledge of real Shakespeare scholarship. He imagines Dr. Johnson and William Hazlitt and Harold Bloom peeking out from behind a giant neon sign that insists "Shakespeare Is Fun!"

Eleven minutes to curtain and still no Ellen. Only strangers' faces appear in the door. New York City, thousands of miles from their childhood homes, an inexhaustible font of strangers. This is what he wanted, he reminds himself. To leave Utah. To never return except to visit. The usual collection of imaginary horrors, the car accidents and street crimes, present themselves for consideration. He knows Utah is not immune to such things. But that thought—her alone in the city—arouses sharp guilt. I will not forgive myself if it happens here, he tells himself. I brought her here. Denying the thought further cultivation, he lets it wither. She's just running late, he tells himself.

He remembers reading the play out loud in his ninth grade English class. Ms. Halprin, stern, tall, gray, selected him to read the part of Romeo. The picture that memory produces—himself back in Utah more than twenty-five years ago—startles him. That picture seems like an incongruous intruder: he can scarcely imagine a prior version of himself more remote from his present iteration, or a time or place more remote from the city. Yet the picture and the underlying events seem to promise something lacking in him, the city, or perhaps both. It is irresistible to him.

"Lisa Smithson," Ms. Halprin intoned after naming Tom Romeo, "you will read Juliet." Lisa smiled, nodding in agreement. Lisa was a beautiful girl, intriguing too, Tom thought, because she was shy compared to most girls like her. In terms of progress through puberty, she was a few years ahead of him. He considered her far beyond his grasp, his heart began to pound, and he hoped this play, entirely unknown to him except that it stood for romance, would somehow extend his grasp. He looked up at Ms. Halprin, and she shot him a strange look. He didn't know what it was; it seemed mischievous and satisfied and kind. She likes me, he thought, and she is enjoying herself; she concocted this situation, my Romeo opposite Lisa's Juliet, on purpose.

He didn't understand a lot of what he read, but certain things were exciting to say to a beautiful girl, right there in class, under cover of an assignment. "See, how she leans her cheek upon her hand! / O, that I were a glove upon that hand, / That I might touch that cheek!" As the sound of his own

voice saying those words echoed in his ear, the image they unfolded to him distracted him from reading.

"Ay me!" Lisa responded as Juliet.

He was silent. "*She speaks*," Ms. Halprin prompted him. "*She speaks*."

He heard muffled laughter from the back of the classroom. "I heard her," he replied. More laughter, this time not muffled. Waking from his reverie, still almost feeling Lisa's porcelain cheek in his hand, still almost poised to kiss her, he furiously scanned the page for his next line. He found his place and read.

Lisa was sitting two rows of desks to his left and one row forward. She looked back at him. He could feel her eyes on him. Not looking up, he made the most of his peripheral vision; he held her gaze for a few seconds. Two pages later she looked again. This time he looked up and their eyes met. He thought there was something in her look, something promising, but he wasn't sure. He half smiled and turned back to his copy of the play. Later, she looked again and their eyes met again. He thought there was definitely something in her look this time. "It is *working*," he told himself.

It took them three classes to read the play. In those three days, having spent an hour each afternoon as Romeo, he became a stranger to himself. He did not pour over the statistics inside the last page of the sports section. He was too distracted for geography, let alone geometry; neglected homework piled up. He found himself just sitting there in his room, replaying in his mind the things they read to each other and the way she looked at him. He wasn't sure that her looks meant anything, so he affected indifference. He told himself he didn't really care about Shakespeare or Juliet or Lisa.

The day they finished with the play, Ms. Halprin gave them a homework assignment. She asked them to bring to the next class a list of items that a pair of teenage lovers running away from home would need. They were supposed to estimate how much each item would cost. "Recurring expenses," Ms. Halprin explained, "should be estimated on a monthly basis."

Judging by his list (plane tickets, hotel room, room service), Mike Buttars had completed the assignment by dreaming up a vacation with his imaginary girlfriend. Ms. Halprin asked for a volunteer, and Mike had raised his hand. Ms. Halprin was incredulous. "What about after that? Where will you stay?" she demanded. "What will you eat? What about util-

ities? Do you have insurance? How much will it cost and where will you get the money? Who's going to hire a kid your age?"

Tom felt betrayed. And he feels betrayed all over again, sitting there in that theater, remembering the way Lisa nodded her head knowingly as Ms. Halprin went on and on. Lisa didn't look back at him again. Maybe she wouldn't have anyway, but that feeling colored what he did not know. Looking at the side of Lisa's face from two rows right and one row back, Tom observed that the warm inquiring look from the other day was gone; her practical stare now matched the mundane details of Ms. Halprin's rant.

Yet from the red velvet chair where he now sits, Tom sees that what Ms. Halprin said was true. We were pathetic, he thinks, completely dependent. So what? Did we really talk about her average monthly electric bill? Why didn't she lead us further into the world of that play? Why didn't she explain the impenetrable language that we had just chopped our way through? Why didn't we at least write appallingly bad essays worthy of a ninth-grade English class? Did she really think that even one of us was plotting to run away from home? That her assignment was a necessary antidote to the otherwise irresistible charms of *Romeo and Juliet*? Was that assignment the culmination of some kind of romance vaccine that grim school administrators had directed her to dispense? Tom had been thinking about getting his guts up to kiss a girl at the time. And a girl letting him, wanting him to. But running away? All these years later, a new irony occurs to Tom: Ms. Halprin's assignment did not render the play impotent to him; on the contrary, it convinced him that the play was both powerful and dangerous if not properly contained.

What he felt must have shown on his face. He glared at Ms. Halprin, their eyes met, and she shot him another strange look. She smiled but seemed sad. "You enjoyed everything I could give you," he imagined her saying. And, "You didn't actually think I could make her love you, did you? That any of that was real?"

Looking behind him, hoping again that Ellen would appear in the doorway at the back of the hall, he grins to think that Ms. Halprin gave him something better than a teenage romance, something with an exponentially longer shelf-life, a memory of futile longing.

The lights go dim and bright and dim again. He looks at his watch; three minutes to curtain. Call her, he thinks. But his phone is in his coat, checked at the door. He will call at intermission if she doesn't make it by

then. He decides not to look again at the door behind him. In complete darkness, just before the curtain goes up, she makes her way down the aisle, climbing over people who had missed a chance to notice both her beauty and her companion.

He grasps her hand. Leaning into her, his lips touching her left ear, he whispers, "I'm glad you made it."

She shrugs and laughs and shakes her head. "You don't want to know," she whispers, smiling, defeated. "Our supplier delivered late, and the kids, and dinner, and then the babysitter—and then the traffic and parking and trying to run in these shoes—You don't want to know."

"I'm glad you made it," he repeats quietly.

It's a good production. The cast handles the language with care, but the players are lively, vigorous, anything but cautious. The set is simple, mostly stark white. The costumes are out of a Merchant and Ivory film, centuries after Shakespeare, nothing to do with Italy, Edwardian, he guesses, but at least not too distracting.

Juliet on her balcony and Romeo below plays out again before him. One of Juliet's lines, words he does not recall from prior encounters with the play, stand out to him: "*Too like the lightning, which doth cease to be / Ere one can say it lightens.*"

His mind drifting, he sees again the steam rising off the shoulders in front of them, the intermittent miniature clouds swirling above their heads as they breathed in and out. They were a throng of students pouring out of the fieldhouse (packed, poorly ventilated) into the parking lot behind the high school. His friend Aaron was with him; Aaron was bringing to bear all of his persuasive powers on a girl. Her pink sweater—a fitted, flattering little thing—was made for purposes other than her warmth. Aaron was going on about the cold and how he could keep her warm as he walked her to her car. It was pathetic and thrilling; Tom felt as if he were witnessing something private: Aaron was begging for affection, but Aaron was his ride home. Tom kept close to them, listening to every word Aaron said. He noticed her feeble resistance.

Feeling jealous and alone and emboldened, Tom asked, shouting: "Anyone cold? Any lady here who needs a strong man to keep her warm? It's cold out, but not in my arms!" He had an instinct for laying out exactly what he was feeling without feeling exposed at all—his emotional bets were hedged—he was mocking Aaron. People laughed. Looking around he caught the eye of a girl, Cindy Clark, beautiful, too mature for high

school, popular, mean. He knew exactly what to say: "Hey Cindy, I can help you! Your boyfriend played a good game, but now he's showering with the team and you look cold! I can help you!" She shrugged in disgust and said something inaudible and snotty to her friends.

He was amused. Tom enjoyed his own company. He still does, at least when he remembers himself at sixteen. He felt a tug at his arm, and she was lifting it and ducking under it and pulling it around her neck. Sarah, his first girlfriend. "Help me," she said. "I like warmth." A girl had never touched him like that before, he remembered; it was something so sincere and assertive and attractive. She went along with the joke, but he was not a joke to her. She was more daring than he was; without any kind of hedge, she was taking a risk. He was amazed.

He tried to think fast to somehow make her risk pay. He smiled broadly and said something about conserving heat as he pulled her closer. He said that he hoped she had a hard time finding a good parking spot tonight. "I hope you parked in Canada," he said.

They were sophomores; almost one year had passed since Ms. Halprin and Lisa as Juliet. One year, he says to himself silently, his eyes wandering away from the stage. So much in just one year! The bitterness that thought arouses surprises him. Since then, more than twenty-five years have passed. He feels now the same as he did ten years ago, only more worn down. And how much had he changed, how much stronger he felt, after that one year! He tries to remember more than embellishments that later threatened to eclipse the actual events of that night; he reminds himself that she was not his girlfriend until weeks after that night after the basketball game.

In the following weeks, he found her at school and they talked. She called him and they talked on the phone. For several consecutive weekends, she hosted small parties at her parents' house. He was sixteen and she was fifteen. These parties ensured formal compliance with the Mormon prohibition on dating before sixteen, but they were a pretext engineered for the sole purpose of getting Tom and Sarah close to each other on the couch and holding hands. When they talked, they spoke about their classes at school and friends. They spoke about their families: the people and relationships that exerted on them the domestic equivalent of gravity. He teased her and at the same time paid her compliments calculated to safely convey how he felt. They revealed things they did not tell others: aspirations their parents would dismiss as foolish, fears their sib-

lings and friends might eventually exploit. They did not talk about what was happening between them; they never put a name to what they had become.

Usually broke, Tom scraped together enough money to take Sarah to the prom. She was beautiful; she wore a pink dress. In a group with three other couples, they observed the ritual in every detail—exchanging corsage and boutonniere, dinner, dancing, photographs before an improbable backdrop, and an after-dance party.

It was late, well after midnight, and Tom was driving Sarah home. Her family lived on the bench, higher in elevation by several hundred feet than his. It occurred to him to kiss her on the doorstep. The thought of kissing her was not new to him. But this thought—I should kiss her, *now*, in just a few minutes—was. His car, a gutless Renault Alliance, labored as it climbed the hill. Every foot in elevation they climbed, his heart pounded harder. The pounding was loud in his ears, and he hoped she couldn't hear it. The joy and exhaustion from hours of dancing and being together mixed with sudden anticipation impaired and enriched his vision. He saw that the road they climbed was a thin glass tube and his little red car was the temperature rising.

They were silent. As they walked from the car to the house, he could smell the thick grass and felt it soft and slick with dew under the patent leather shoes he had rented with his tuxedo. She stopped at the door and turned to face him. Smiling and tired, she sighed: "I had a good time tonight."

He wasn't worried about the kissing part, but he didn't know how to get there from where he stood. "She doesn't want me to," he silently told himself. It was what he most feared at that moment. He took a step forward and looked into her eyes. He did not find the fervent "yes" he was looking for. Certain he would do it wrong—fully prepared for rejection—he raised his right hand to her jaw, lifted slightly, and kissed her lips. For a first kiss, it was not without ardor.

Both of them were oblivious to Sarah's cat, weaving in and out and purring and rubbing itself against their ankles. Still kissing, minutes later, Sarah lost her balance and shifted her feet. Moving with her as she shifted, Tom planted a foot squarely on the cat's tail. Shrieking violently, the cat shot itself across the doorstep and into the bushes. Shuddering involuntarily, momentarily sharing the cat's instinctual urge to evade a predator,

Tom and Sarah released each other. Shock subsiding, they grinned and looked at each other, suddenly shy, a question hanging between them.

"Now, where were we?" Tom broke the silence.

"Good night, Tom," Sarah said, smiling widely as she opened the door and slipped away from him.

"Good night?" he replied. "Good night? I hope you weren't attached to that cat, because as soon as you close that door, I'm going to hunt it down, and kill it, and eat it!"

"Save me a piece, Tom," she replied. "We'll have a picnic. Good night!"

"Good night," Tom said as he watched her, still smiling at him as she slowly closed the door.

Tom's attention returns to the stage: having made love, waking together in her chamber, Romeo and Juliet address each other. Tom had seen a production of Gounod's opera in college; its depiction of this scene had left an impression. There was a vast scarlet bed draped in translucent curtains. Huddled in the center, as if the bed was a tiny raft bobbing on the ocean, Romeo clutched Juliet. Their arias intertwined.

At sixteen Tom was not entirely naive or abnormally pious. He recalled how, along with his Scout troop, he had thoroughly completed the requirements for the bawdy humor merit badge (still not officially recognized). Jokes are safe when actual sex is such a remote possibility. For Tom and Sarah that kiss and others like it was all. This was a fact Tom had never questioned. Both of them had endured innumerable "morality lessons" at church. At once hilarious and embarrassing, these guided tours through the Mormon list of sexual prohibitions made explicit the boundaries that were otherwise part of the natural landscape of their youth. Comfortable with this landscape, believing in it, Tom and Sarah willingly complied.

Not really remembering how long it lasted or even how it ended, Tom attempts to mentally reconstruct the spring of his sophomore year. Prom was in the middle of April and the last day of school was late May or early June. In that interval, he remembers a Friday night with a group of friends in the canyon around a campfire, he and Sarah holding each other and eventually kissing once again. He remembers going hiking with her in the foothills more than once. Dancing and laughing and taking pictures of each other, they were inseparable at the spring fling, the end-of-the-year party under the lights of the football field. The last good thing between

them he remembers was the last day of school. He stopped to add up the weeks. Was it only a couple of months? At most five months, counting from the parking lot after the basketball game?

On the last day of school, after hours of yearbook-signing, sprawled awkwardly on the brown-carpet hallways of the high school, they went to her parents' house. They were alone. Reading out loud entries left in her yearbook by certain boys, he inserted missing words that clarified their meaning: "Sarah, It was great to have Algebra with you this year [because I enjoyed staring at the back of your head and drooling]. You and Tom are great together [but not as great as we would be together!] Don't forget to invite me to any parties you throw over the summer [Call me! Call me! Please! Lose Tom and give me a freaking chance!]. Sincerely, Nate Simmons [your secret admirer]." Laughing, she grabbed Tom's yearbook and gave some girls' entries similar readings.

Already holding each other's yearbooks, they eventually turned to making their own entries. Tom had no memory of what either wrote. Tom remembered feeling pressure to write something good. Sarah started writing as soon as she found a blank page and she wrote for a long time.

She thought this out in advance, he told himself, anticipating his own failure to write something even close to appropriately thoughtful. Sitting there, watching her write, trying to think of anything, he thought of another problem. How much should he say—about them, about how he cared for her? He imagined writing an extended rendition of "stay cool over the hot summer" while she poured sincere emotions into his book. The opposite would be much worse, he told himself, me attempting to write my feelings and her sidestepping the issue.

He also imagined his words, his handwriting, his name, a permanent part of that book, high on a shelf somewhere in her future home. Years from now would she pull her yearbook down and read what I wrote? How would she read it? The answers depended on unknown future events. If anything real ever happened between them, it would not happen for years. He would serve a mission. Both would go to college, but neither knew where. Failing to resolve anything, time running out, he made his entry in her yearbook. He doubted it said anything that would now make him proud.

A rough timetable was easier to concoct than a clear picture of how it ended. There was no single fight that marked the end. There were petty arguments; but they were more effect than cause. They were about noth-

ing in particular, just gasps of frustration. Even so, Tom tells himself, I probably said things I would regret if I could remember. There was no other girl. As far as he knew, there was no other boy. There was not even a real breakup; she never actually told him it was over. But after a certain point, they did not talk to each other at all. They appeared at the same parties and had classes together their junior year and never even made eye contact. He missed her. Eventually he regretted demanding that she bear the burden of initiating further contact. They spoke once, briefly, at the end of their senior year, and only a few more times in all the years that followed.

Tom considers blaming the other people in their lives. Her parents didn't like him, and most of Tom's friends wanted a chance with Sarah. Not exactly Montagues and Capulets at each other's throats, Tom acknowledges to himself, but he is up to the task of misreading Shakespeare. He speculates that the bard's vague "ancient grudge break to new mutiny" is really a place-holder for more universal primal impulses: a parent's conviction that no boy is good enough for his daughter, a boy's urge to obtain his friend's girlfriend.

What he felt that day writing in her yearbook, he tells himself all these years later—the sense that so much could change in the coming years—had something to do with it. In those years, the boundaries and expectations imposed by church and family would prevail. He asked himself whether "imposed" was fair. Was it more like "willingly accepted" and "reinforced by church and family?" Will is only so free, Tom reflected, we choose from a limited range of options. Anyway, Tom did not regret his decisions: the morality lessons and missionary service and everything else had served him well. And Tom could not truly resent how Church and family demanded sacrifice and imposed obligations. What made these things terrible made them good. It was simply this: These things were part of what killed his first love.

"*Romeo is banished!*" Juliet cries from the stage. "*There is no end, no limit, measure, bound, / In that word's death.*" Tom grins. These lines are a litany of superlatives fitting a teenage girl. Shifting, turning inward, his mind lights on something overpowering and entirely foreign to him. He sees pieces of himself scattered across a map, in places, in people, and he needs to gather those pieces together. He wants to live in a small town where no one ever leaves. His memories of Sarah, startlingly vivid as they were, are only a small corner in a vast cavity. Tom longs for the ground it-

self that his much younger feet had touched when he walked. He remembers how his entire body felt to him then. The ghost of that young body, something tells him, haunts that ground.

He questions the city. It promises everything, good and bad, except his past. On that subject it is unhaunted, pathetic with ignorance. He shudders. I am a refugee from a provincial backwater, he silently declares. He had taken considerable pride in that fact since leaving home, but now it was powerless to beat back the present realization. I am an exile, he admits to himself. From my past. From the people and places and times that constitute me.

Eyes returning to the stage, Tom notices that Juliet now lies entombed, her thin arms drawn across her bosom. Dead to everyone but the Friar, not actually dead, essentially dead to the audience who knows how this one ends. Soon Romeo will come from Mantua, vial of poison in hand. He will reluctantly slay Paris and then kill himself. Juliet will wake, dead husband at stage left, dead suitor, stage right. Tom watches intently. This Juliet does not rage and moan like others he had seen. She is despondent, but daring and resolute, too.

A clever choice, Tom thinks, if it is intentional. This is not an after-school special; making suicide frightening is not required. Indeed, all the play's carnage is really beside the point. None of them—not Juliet, not Romeo, not Paris or Mercutio or Lady Montague—actually die. The only real casualty is what passed between that girl and boy. That lightning bolt gone dark before girl or boy could name it.

It would have died anyway, Tom tells himself. Don't spend another minute searching for a cause. It was all rapture and sweetness—too sweet to survive. Even if we had not stopped talking—some men do marry the first girl they ever dated—it would have become something else. Life would have injured it. Hell, Tom thinks, I would have injured it. Trying my hardest to give it life, I would have bruised it beyond recognition. And at best it would have become something mature, modest, practical, something that had a chance of survival. But that sweet untested thing is safe where I left it, in the past, in my head, an indelible memory, insignificant perhaps among the others I have collected, an eternal possession all the same.

None of them actually died, Tom tells himself again. Certainly most of them, the Mercutios and Lady Montagues, did not even remember playing a bit part in someone else's story. All of them lived on, doing what was required, surviving other much larger losses, forming and maintain-

ing other more consequential relationships. If any of them do remember, they rarely think about it. Before tonight, years had passed since Sarah had crossed Tom's mind. Speaking about it is rarer still. That is probably right, Tom thinks, feeling the presence of Ellen next to him. She knows the Sarah story, she feels no threat, she had her own first love before Tom. Only infrequently, they had reminisced to each other about these people, now remote strangers.

It occurs to Tom that doing so does not confirm to him that his memories are authentic. There is circumstantial evidence. Unless it had been lost in one of their moves, there is a box that contains both Tom's sophomore yearbook and a picture from that prom. But only talking to people who were there, Tom's friends and particularly Sarah herself, could fully authenticate his recollection. It probably would have been enough to look her in the eye and ask: "Do you remember?" But Tom knows that he will never contact Sarah. Far from deterring him, the thought of an irrationally jealous husband is almost funny. Not that Tom knows Sarah's husband at all. Why should he question her judgment anyway? He's probably a great guy. The problem is that Sarah herself could so easily misinterpret the gesture. Tom is afraid he would impose upon her something awkward when he simply wants to say: "You were a dear friend to me. Thank you."

Even with those few friends with whom he still has contact, he will never mention Sarah. "He is still obsessed with her after all these years," they would say. "What a hollow exercise of propriety," he wants to lecture them. Afraid of the sweetness, Tom tells himself, hurt by its long absence, we deny ourselves some of our sweetest memories.

The lights go bright again, the applause gradually fades, and they slowly make their way down the aisle and out of the theater. Passing through the crowd, Tom and Ellen encounter no faces they recognize. Wondering what it would be like to see there anyone from the past, a distant cousin, anyone, Tom contemplates the Salt Lake theaters that he knows. Would a friend pass through one of those lobbies tonight?

Comparing this *Romeo and Juliet* to others they have seen together, Tom and Ellen walk to an all-night cafe on Seventh Avenue for dessert. Eventually they make their way to the garage where their car is parked and drive out of the city and home.