

Mark Higham

## Adam's Career

I followed my sister around like a dutiful puppy and equally unaware of the consequences. She resisted telling me her secrets, after they spilled free during a chattiness inspired of wine one uninspiring night. I gradually became rooted in the shared ancestral memory while she refused me a place at the table, her popular table, burgeoned to accommodate the performers who made up her circle, her perplexing circle with so many angles one would think you could build a room around it. Despite bullies forming at the borders of believability, I had my sister to cure any upstart notions of a habitable life. Even though she did her best to show me my place, an invisible attachment yoked us like birds of a feather. Our fates intertwined in a mockery of equals, stepwise to one cast as the hero, the other the sidekick.

Childhood seemed to bring out the hostility in children like a Vaudevillian show, Punch and Judy whaling away, never bruising the shocked tender flesh. Traumas had more of a uniting function than that of harm. Viola, my sister, told me so, enlisting me into her secret society though only temporarily. There's a

strange hate to love. We were refugees from our own selves, exiled to a hidden weakness. Memory distorted, splintering until recall uncovered the buried perils.

We were playing a game, one which required an investment in the outcome though I was too young to care.

“Come on,” Viola screamed at me. “You’ve got to try harder.”

My eyes felt extra dovey as I batted my lashes, trying to ride out this, whatever it was. People ran awkward circles around me, perhaps wondering why it was I didn’t seem to know my place. Then something in the air, perhaps a ball. I knew what that was. I wasn’t terribly worried about a ball game I hadn’t agreed to play. But the ball hung for a moment, battling the air like a schooner in water, diving down to bounce at my feet. I made stabbing motions with my arms, thinking the raining ball had made a spectacular display, doubling as a loopy astronaut or perhaps a bird recently landed.

“Pick it up,” I heard Viola shout. “The ball, the ball. Take it, Charlie. Take it and run!”

I didn’t know what she meant by calling me Charlie, but I felt her urgency as my own, sniffing out a brief protest before reaching down, hanging over my own shins, and swaddling the ball with pointy ends, running into nowhere.

My confusion over which direction should be my goal must have been evident to the other players. As I scudded down the yard, the frame of our game, I brushed against a boy, older than me, maybe aged the same as Viola, who was five years older than me.

“Hey little man,” he said. “Do you know where you’re going?”

I indicated a quick no, getting booming laughter from the gathered boys. I heard the sound of Viola's breathing.

"Let him go," Viola shouted through possible wheezing. I plunged ahead without benefit of allies.

I heard the budding laughter as I continued to scramble in something resembling a circle. The boys were lined up like bumpers inside a pinball machine. I caromed too closely to one or another friendly-looking shin, spinning like a less dependable ball bearing. I began to sense the desperation of my plight. The number of barriers to my progress tangled my feet as I kicked at the edge of the flower bed, watching yellow daffodils bend with my stamping. And still, a mounting panic spurred me on even though I twirled like an amateur ballerina, tripping over my feet as I stumbled into a final face plant on the grassy earth.

"There boys," came Viola's voice. I felt her foot planted in the small of my back. "Charlie Brown never wins. Lucy is his boss. I am the boss of you."

I heard the boys whistling and jeering. It had never occurred to me that I might become a simple prop, a punch line coming after the beat of a bat. Viola had enlisted me in her own version of a game, one in which directions mattered less than points to be made. She reached down to ruffle my hair.

"You did good, David," she said. "Wanna play Snoopy next?"

It seemed we watched different cartoons. "Who's Snoopy?" I asked.

She shook her head. "It's okay. You're not fit for playing a dog. Though you're in the right position. Haven't you heard of people who kick their dogs?"

I felt her foot lift off of me, suddenly descending, knocking into my head. Stars exploded in my eyes. I felt bitter-tasting tears in my mouth. Viola's continuing cruelty was just one more point to score, one more

argument in a string of complaints against society, like she knew, at that young age even, that the boys around her would soon be men, and they would boss her beyond imagination. It was in imagination where memories grew into overbearing mothers, berating weakened wills into a submission made for women, garnering accolades in the refusal to bow to motherly expectations. Perhaps Viola's complaints were legion, perhaps mine were too, and yet the stain of cruel treatment rested in a blistered howl of rebellion, obscuring recollection in a strangled vine of thoughts, stranded as well as locked in the prison of the mind.

As the years went by, we drifted off into separate pursuits. I felt like a perpetual boy, almost needing a Tinker Bell to stave off the pirates of my mind. Viola went off to college, seeking a BFA at a university that wasn't altogether promising as a ground zero for a career in theater performance. Our mother would sometimes quiz me about the darker corners of Viola's ambition. Mother didn't seem to think that yearning for a middling position in summer stock or Shakespeare in the Park, could possibly be normal when everyone else desired Hollywood. I told mother that true artists don't yearn, they pine, until greater developments slipstreamed in view. Mother wouldn't compare us. She believed in the privacy to vacate one's senses in peace. This would have been around the time I had been diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder.

I went to my own university, located nearby like a dive bar one didn't know how to fathom. With several turns around a curriculum that left me mostly bored, I did, however, gravitate toward a philosophy class that had, as its central claim to fame, featured readings by Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Nietzsche. The density of thought I was exposed to, the ruffling of feathers among established thinkers, the twilight of rebel powers, anxieties born of a too-heavy consciousness, circuitous roads clamoring around the academy with an astonishing lack of censorship. These authors mattered to me in ways I hadn't thought possible, or even bearable. Reading

them felt like stuffing too much breath, too much life, into one incompletely lived body. But then the ultimate distraction of an actual mental illness convened in my life, sucking it out dry, leaving a husk behind. Now I knew I'd never be the superman of Nietzsche's dream, though perhaps I could cultivate my sadness just as Kierkegaard did after refusing a marriage. He devoted his life to burying his pain in his gift for expression, making a pact with God that he had not misread the signs. God refused him clarity, just as his tortured prose explored the eminent basis of a thoughtful life. He was the patron saint of sufferers. I'm certain he'd welcome me into the club.

Mother, curiously, never asked me about my own ambitions since they had been drowned in a rain of prescription medications. She stood in the hall upstairs, looking blissfully unconcerned of her own misgivings, the memory of my father, died of his own illness long ago, swept into the ancestral past where his ghost would haunt our present in a series of nighttime visitations.

After spending a year abroad in London, Viola found herself shopping her picture around Los Angeles while waiting tables. I don't think mother knew what to think about this turn towards the cliché in her. I told mother poverty was a virtue even when seeking fortune and fame. I knew Viola wouldn't be able to resist the kind of clap on the back that came with a slot in a big budget movie. I hoped she never discovered how remote the odds deplaning hopefuls would finally land the wanted break. I had my own troubles, shaking in my bed sheets with the fear of never going to sleep; fighting off all kinds of hallucinatory thought; keeping dark clouds at bay. I thought perhaps I should write a screenplay, and enlist Viola to play the heavy. She would have to be the villain. I was, after all, the younger brother who had endured every assault. My character would die in the first act. I'm not designed for playing the hero, making instead, a stellar victim.

Mother shouted out to me to pick up the phone. When I asked, she followed up with, "It's your sister."

"Hey, buddy boy," she said, entirely too cheery.

"Hi Viola," I said.

"Say," she began, "I heard about the diagnosis. Bad luck that."

"And worse being the one it happened to."

"Silver linings and all that."

"Yeah."

"Hey. Is mom listening in?"

"Not presently."

"Two things. I just came back from a shrink myself. He said I have Borderline Personality Disorder.

Aren't we peas in a pod?"

"What does that mean?"

"It means you better be nice to me."

"Great. You've been telling me that for years."

"Yeah, well. I'll cast you in my next movie. You don't mind being an extra, do you?"

"Everything feels extra at this point."

"Until the casting director gets here...but, um, you know. I need to ask you a favor. Sure mom isn't around?"

"Sure."

"I need five hundred dollars. Can you float me that much?"

“Yeah, I’ll send it. I suppose you’re good for it.”

“Only the finest for the fine,” she said, cryptically.

“I don’t suppose...oh, never mind.”

“Come on. Chin up. What’s the worst that could happen?”

“A slow cold death at the hands of an illness that doesn’t care if you’re cheery or not.”

“Oh no you don’t. Positive thinking, dummy. You are what you think.”

“I’m not thinking much these days so I assume I’m just a human question mark at this point.”

“Okay honey. Don’t forget about the money.”

“We can’t have you without a silver spoon.”

“Jesus. Stop tilting at windmills and get with the program.”

I paused for a really long time, wondering if I should change my name to Sancho to avoid the leading role.

“Okay,” she said, interrupting my fantasy of seeing Viola in *The Man of La Mancha*. But quixotic as my life had become, I couldn’t imagine Viola in anything short of an off-Broadway rendition of singing cats, until I remembered it’d been done on Broadway to much acclaim. I almost asked her if she might use the money to purchase talking cats when I realized that she could barely carry a tune, and how unfortunate to be upstaged by the entire animal kingdom. I was used to needling her as he was to me, but somehow the words wouldn’t form, and I lapsed into passivity, unsure what the script had in mind next.

“Cheer up. Once I’m really rich, I’ll share the wealth, and you can give the finger to your disease.”

“I don’t think you can buy off a mental illness.”

“Honey, everything has a price. You don’t want to be left holding the bag. You’re not the dumbest person, but no intellectual points for martyrdom. You’ll think for awhile that you’re being very brave, but nothing succeeds like success.”

“You sound like an infomercial now.”

“No, just speaking common sense. Shut up unless you have something really, I mean really, interesting to say.”

“What’s the point.”

“Just so you know who’s boss.”

Something murky sought to bubble up, but I couldn’t see it, or feel it, or anesthetize it in case it came after me later. As I hung up on Viola, I thought how she still was kicking me in the head.

I took care of the money for Viola, hoping, on some level, that it would furnish a cache of luck along with the cash. I didn’t take her declaration of making me rich all that seriously. I was somewhat afraid that she might make good on her offer to cast me in her movie. But the irrationality of wishing for the opposite of good fortune, albeit as fleeting as it would be to actually appear in my celluloid self, battling demons internal and external as the closing credits drain theaters, leaving watchers to search for a way to process the assault to their sight. Viola and I never suffered from shared ambition, but we understood the mechanics of suffering, battling mortality in the guises of illnesses that affronted. Apparently, suffering had mutated its profile over time, hiding itself in the realistic self, actual and potential pains masking the horror of isolation in a make-believe community positing the illusion of connection in a welter of emotional bruises. It seemed that Viola barely had time to spend the money I sent when I heard from her again.



I came to the phone, rubbing my eyes that had verged on sleep until Viola's phone call gave me an excuse to cease trying for unconsciousness that wouldn't come. I held up a hand to mother who kept fetching me as if Viola had her on retainer. Mother, hair in curlers, looked at me funny like she wondered what could Viola possibly want this late at night. I nodded to mom less to slake her curiosity, and more to assure her that I was equal to whatever task Viola had in mind. If I only knew...

"Oh good of you to call, David," she said.

"Uh-uh. You called me, remember? Everything Okay?"

"La-de-da," she said with all the singsongs included. "Isn't life just a droll thing?"

I didn't think the question needed an answer. "Have you been drinking?"

"Of course." She seemed to perk up. "But that's not the point."

"So what is the point?"

"How many moments in a day?" she asked, descending into the cryptic again.

"Depends on how you measure?" I said, accenting the question mark.

"No, no, no," she said. "You've got to sing for your supper. Climb every mountain/Ford every stream..."

She's done it, I thought. She's checked out of reality.

"Go on. I'll knight you or something. You can be the delegated performer."

"Viola..."

"No, no, no. You can be the one in shining armor. You can rescue me like a maiden in a fairy tale, like a nun exiled to the mountains, singing to the pine trees in absence of an audience."

"Viola," I repeated, failing to realize that I wouldn't get a word in edgewise.

“Well, what if I was to tell you that I’ve decided to end it all. Actual suicide, gone the way of the dodo, entombed. I will be no more.”

“Now that isn’t funny.” I felt a lump in my throat, wondering if she’d just taken leave of her senses or did she really mean this. “Have you thought to call a doctor?”

“I don’t see doctors nowadays,” she said. “They are no better than parents. If I wanted that kind of advice, I’d just move in with you and mom.”

“The way you’re talking, I’d heartily recommend you come over. We can run it like a campout so it won’t feel too permanent for you.”

“No, no, no. That would spoil the game. I’m going to off myself, and you’re welcome to stop me.”

“All of a sudden, you sound more rational; like you’ve been planning. Are you at your house?”

“Yes.”

“Stave off any far too interesting thoughts. Don’t shake hands with death until I get there. Understand?”

“No, no, no. Play the game.”

“Viola...I—“ the other side clicked into static like a heart monitor going out of syncopation.

I yelled up at mother that I was going out. She appeared at the top of the stairs, her head swaying back and forth, pursed lips asking why?

“It’s Viola,” I cast over my fleeing shoulder. It was always and ever Viola, even when she intended to write herself off. Perhaps all of us would go with her, fading into black with a director’s commanding emission of cut, and would the scenes all crush into each other, herding out the vanished to an editing room floor.

I gripped the steering wheel of the Buick, decades older than our present moment as I chugged down 405, turning into Van Nuys, eyes scanning for the ranch house posing as Viola's abode. The sky felt heavy with the weight of darkness, illumination breaking a monotony with street lights passing by like rails without the insistent click. I found the appropriate road, wondering if the ghosts of artists past were wandering about. The neighborhood had been that kind of place, welcoming musicians, especially Kurt Cobain. Sad subject there. He succumbed to the void, oddly evading life and all the success he had attained. Prominence was no defense against despair. My thoughts swung like an open barn door, wondering about the level of commitment of Viola's declaration. People ejaculated words they didn't mean all the time, but until the moment of denouement, no one could be really clear about the force of the intention. I decided best not to trust to type. I would talk her down from every precipice, noting how opportunities were best never faced. It was a universal urge, after all. Negation hung like a minus sign in the atmosphere, collecting rage in bundles of anxious thought, strewn too close to the horizon to foreclose access. I shunted aside my own misgivings, having to stow away kindred feelings. Viola's house rolled into view, and I pulled into the driveway, putting into place the parking brake, hauling out into the walkway up to the door, becoming immediately flummoxed.

The first task presented itself. How was I going to get in? I didn't feel hopeful about just toggling the doorknob for entrance. I whistled quietly. The house was rather a big one, stacking its two floors in the bosom of a gallant shell. The siding looked freshly painted, roofing not yet eroded from the weather's lathe. For a moment, I doubted whether I'd actually found the right house. The moon shed light, draping over the ground like a shroud. My head panned from side to side, attention catching on a ladder propped against a wall. As

lunatic as the idea seemed, I planned to ascend the rungs, hoping the metal hadn't become overly worn. I swung my eyes upward, fixing on a glowing window on the second floor, thinking, without knowing why, that a point of entry had presented. I didn't know if I needed to be stealthy, but that front door looked like a vast screen, making everything within ensconced into privacy. I became nervously preoccupied with the door, with thoughts of Viola, and what it would mean if I arrived too late. That thought spurred me into grappling with the ladder which, with hands shaking, scuffed against the siding until finally settling into a sighing stability. I reached for a rung, beginning to climb, foot lifting, hands grabbing, feeling like this very meager height was still a feature of fear. The ladder began to shudder against my hesitation. I stopped my limbs from climbing with the sudden sound of the front door swinging open.

A human form appeared on the stoop. Light fluttered outward from inside.

"I don't see anything out here," the person, I guessed male, said, apparently communicating to someone within. "What? What did you say? Well, why should I look up? The scraping sound came from where?"

I froze against the ladder, wondering both what other people were doing here, and also, what should I do now? For an instant, I thought I felt myself bunching up into a question mark, having reduced to a form of punctuation. The ladder felt like an alien body trying to bear me away in its space ship. I decided the best thing I could do was rappel back down. When I stepped for the ground, the man at the door and myself came in view of each other.

"Were you just up on that ladder?" he said to me. I faltered, hesitantly and briefly bleating nonsense. "Casing the joint or something?"

I finally found my tongue. "I'm David, Viola's brother. I didn't mean anything..."

“You shouldn’t be swinging on ladders, especially strange ones about houses that don’t know you.

Auditioning for something?”

I perceived the humor in his eyes. He had long blonde hair tied up with a ponytail. He looked older than Viola. “No,” I said. “I’ve been feeling really...”

“What’s that you say?” he said, responding to someone inside. “Bring him in? Okay. Well,” he said, squaring to face me. “You’re wanted inside. Let’s not tilt at strange ladders anymore, shall we?” He gestured with a languid arm for me to step inside the house. I flashed an uncertain smile, heading across the threshold.

As I breezed in, I noticed that the light was being cast by candles spread around in a manner that seemed ritualistic.

“Oh,” a woman said, rising from the couch. “There you are. Patrick, did you tell him that we’re in want of a Hamlet?”

I was the question mark again. “I’m here for Viola,” I said, ignored. And then, “Hamlet?”

“Not up on your Shakespeare?” Patrick said, the man on the stoop who had apparently become my guide.

“Viola,” I repeated.

“Who?” Patrick pressed.

One of the two women seemed to have heard. “Ophelia,” she said.

“It is not time for Milady yet,” Patrick said. “You have your own business, first.”

I had not, until now. thought about having business in common with my sister. I had no idea about what I took to be in a play about Hamlet, about which I was being given the title role. It occurred to me that

these were theater people, probably perpetually casting plays, the kind of people Viola undoubtedly would have befriended. But I felt stuck at the moment, heeding a gear in motion I didn't know how to stop.

"If you please," Patrick said.

Someone threw a plastic skull and a fencing foil that Patrick fished in his hands, turning them over to me. I had the question mark in my eyes this time.

"They are your official implements of office, my liege," Patrick said. "Hold the skull before you, just so. Repeat after me. To be or not to be. That is the question." He paused for my response. Absent my cooperation, he continued, "The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune..."

I wondered when I would be permitted to rescue Ophelia or Viola, depending on which role she was playing. I released the skull, watching it bounce and roll away like a marble.

"I wondered if a quest might be in order, Patrick?"

"Hamlet requests to go off script," Patrick declared to the others. "What? What's that you say?" Patrick seemed always required to never hear his friends.

"They said," I said, having heard them, "rewrites are impossible now as the bard has long since past."

"Ah," Patrick said. "No attitude. No attitude at all. Name your quest, kind sir. Fair ladies all. We must inform them of their own path to disaster."

"And what makes their paths so disastrous?" I queried, truly interested.

"Ah, in those ancient times, men wrote women badly, and the wronged women still feel an obligation to the narrative."

I meditated for a moment, on the double heresy of changing canonized words, and failing not to if the words formed the bars of a particular prison. I thought that any particular story did not authorize any particular outcome, but to buck the trend of the formula was to question the unquestioned, something not very much allowed.

“How about your own rewrite,” I whispered to Patrick. He seemed to have heard me and I could almost see the turning wheels of his brain.

“Lower your foil at me,” Patrick said, coaching me.

I did as he instructed. Patrick inched towards me. He flashed his hand out to mine that held the foil, his fingers folding around the narrow blade, guiding it to his heart. I tapped the tip of my foil on his chest.

“Hamlet has murdered Laertes,” Patrick proclaimed, falling to one knee. “Let him not quaff the drug of his undoing. Send him off now to stop Ophelia drowning.”

He lay prostrate on the floor, eyes shut. I looked up to realize that I was standing now in front of the staircase. “On to Ophelia,” I shouted, not knowing what I was doing, discarding the foil. I needed to rescue a maiden who hopefully had already found the fault of the master text. I headed up the stairs, reaching the top, the murmurs of the players below receding as if escaping back into fog. As I reached the top of the stairs, I could see into a room adjoining a short hallway. An overhead light beckoned me in. With heavy heart, having recovered my original purpose, I strode into the bedroom, seeing Viola sprawled on the floor next to a bed bedecked in pink pajamas. I drew in a breath, realizing she was alive.

“Oh hi, David,” Viola said. “What brings you out here this time of night?”

“You don’t recall how you launched me on a quest after you told me you planned to kill yourself?”

“You silly goose,” she said. “You think I’m as sad as that?”

“You think I should have ignored you?” I was beginning to grow hot with anger.

“You have to think for yourself. I can’t be always bailing you out.”

It was then I realized that Viola was exactly as written. A villain who claimed to be a victim, trumpeting the success of the hero as her own, belittled in the narrative, but elevating herself as a fellow sufferer with humanity, even when she wore her own disdain like a robe swathing her.

“I’m sorry, Viola,” I said. “It was not for you. I need to go find the real Ophelia, the one not locked in a game, but understood by the bard as the true heroine, the one for whom minstrels write.”

“Aren’t we dramatic. Be gone then. Miles to go and all that.”

I turned from Viola, striding into the hallway, and descending the stairs, wondering if Patrick would accompany me to the nearest windmill, a quest to be rewritten for a California audience, of course.