

Ralph Bland

WHEREFORE

Sheila

When we first started dating and after we got married I always insisted on attending Shakespeare in the Park during the summers. It became a tradition with us. We'd sit on a blanket fanning ourselves, where I could watch whatever play being held that year and study the female leads in them, Ophelia, Desdemona, Portia, Lady Macbeth, or my favorite, Juliet. I'd won the part of Juliet back in my own college drama days, so there wasn't any way I was ever going to miss seeing *Romeo and Juliet*.

This August night wasn't as hot and humid as some I'd attended in the past, so I wasn't busy trying to keep cool and was able to concentrate on the play without falling out from the heat. This was our second time that summer seeing the star-crossed lovers enacted, and I knew it would be the last time too, because my husband Wayne was over it. He isn't exactly the Shakespeare-type anyway—he sells Toyotas for a living—so after two times this summer experiencing the Bard and the park and platoons of insects eating him alive, he was more than ready to be finished with it for the year.

It was after the balcony scene with the wherefores and the sweet sorrow of parting, when intermission started and the lights came up and people stood to stretch and go to the restrooms and the concession stand, that I saw him walking by himself toward the front on the opposite side of the stage.

Something possessed me to follow him, to leave Wayne behind and go mingle in the crowd where I might accidentally bump into him. This, I thought, was the sort of thing I might see on Turner Classics, Cary Grant running into Joan Fontaine or somebody and unrequited sparks flashing all over the screen, so I told myself how stupid an idea this was and to stay in my seat where I belonged.

Owen

I took off up the aisle when intermission started. Maybe if I hadn't had to take a leak I would have stayed in my seat for ten minutes reading the program just so I'd stay anonymous. To tell the truth I halfway felt like leaving and going home, because, after all, this was *Romeo and Juliet*, so it wasn't like I didn't know what was going to happen next.

I saw her when they first came in. That's why I was taking the circuitous route to the restrooms. I thought it best to go the other way.

You'd think I'd know by now.

It's like every time I come to one of these Shakespeare in the Park events I see her. Most times she's in the audience sitting with her husband, but even if I don't spot her anywhere I can still sense her being around, like she's present whether she is or isn't. Once that idea gets into my head I'm all through with paying attention to what's going on up on the stage.

See, Sheila was my Juliet once, and I was her Romeo.

That, though, is ancient history, college days, and maybe what went on between us back then during acts and scenes and rehearsals and a week of curtain calls and applause the Bard or anybody else wouldn't have taken much notice of, but for me it's something I'm never going to forget. It's one of those things that doesn't go away.

What I'm saying is my romantic history since then has never measured up in real life to the times when I was with Sheila in fair imaginary Verona holding her in my arms uttering poetic speeches to her in words that weren't mine.

It was the best of both worlds, my real life and my dreams.

It's been thirty-five years since Sheila was Juliet and I was Romeo. It wasn't like our play was as big a production as this one going on tonight—no, we had to go cheap at the Wee Theater on campus at Columbia State back then, where maybe a hundred people could squeeze in if they skipped eating dinner that night—but we did six evening performances and a Sunday matinee, and what went on that week was the biggest deal of my life.

Sheila's no young woman anymore, no Juliet now, just a nice-looking older woman. That doesn't matter, though, her and me being older. It's what we had back then that still sticks in my head.

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It was the last week of Junior year, and registration was underway for the spring semester.

I stopped by the Student Center to sign up for classes, and there was Sheila standing in the line for Eighteenth Century British Literature. She and I were both English majors and over the years we'd been in a

couple of classes together, some of her friends were my friends, so we halfway knew each other. But I'd never really been near her that much before, not really up close where I could admire her as I was admiring her right then.

I'm not a bold guy, but since Sheila was right there in front of me I thought it was as good a time as any to say something to her. She didn't exactly drop dead with glee when I did, but she did say hi and smile once before she turned back around and allowed me the opportunity to look at her hair and the nape of her neck. Between her voice and her smile and her luscious-looking nape I could already tell I was fixing to be a goner.

"I wonder if you and me and her are going to be the only ones taking this class," I said, motioning toward the girl ahead of us registering. "I mean, I wonder how many kids are going to sign up for this class just so they can further their knowledge of Alexander Pope?"

"Oh, I like stuff like this," Sheila said. "I really like Jonathon Swift."

I couldn't tell if she was joking or if she was just a weirdo, but I didn't want to alienate her right from the get-go.

"Is Swift brief or speedy like a bullet or fast like a racehorse or what is it about him that appeals to you?"

"He's funny. He takes some getting used to, but he's pretty good once you start studying what he's saying."

"Well, I'm not all that interested in that studying stuff. I'm not a glutton for punishment like some of you other scholars. I just need another class for the hours, and I'm no good in anything but Lit. It's the only thing that comes easy for me."

She glanced at a list in her hand.

“I’ve got one more class to sign up for after this.” She looked at the girl filling out forms at the desk like there might as well be a hundred people there making her wait. “I want to get in line before the one I really want gets filled up.”

“Which one is that?”

“Drama Two. I took Introduction last semester.”

“I took Intro my Freshman year. That and Speech. Both of them made me nervous as all get-out, I guess because it was my first year and I thought everybody was smarter than me. All I did was stutter and stammer and forget what I was going to say about half the time. But I did manage to pass.”

“You could sign up for Drama Two with me. I don’t know anybody else who’s taking it. I’m almost afraid to sign up, to tell the truth. It says you learn about acting techniques and then later the department presents a play in which you have to take part in some capacity. It sounds pretty scary.” She smiled again. “We could both take the class and be nervous wrecks together.”

“I was in a play in high school once, the only one I’ve ever been in. It was ‘Our Town’, and I was the Narrator. I stood behind this podium and read my lines from a notebook. I never had to memorize anything, which was good, because I for sure would have screwed it up. I just stood there in my sport coat with a fake pipe in my hand and pretended to be wise and all-knowing.”

“The only play I’ve ever been in was in elementary school. I was in first grade and was one of the angels in the Christmas play. We were supposed to sing one verse of ‘Silent Night’ and I was too terrified to open my mouth. I started crying and my halo fell off my head and covered my eyes and I couldn’t see anything.”

“Sounds to me like we’re exactly the people the Drama Department is looking for.” And like that, we were together. We were on the same side.

I don’t know how it got that way, because it sure wasn’t me who thought of it. If I’d had my way I wouldn’t have been the smiling helpless fellow who was always at Sheila’s side like we were best pals and confidants who couldn’t do without each other’s company. No, being buddies with Sheila wasn’t what I’d had in mind. I didn’t want to regale her with jokes or gossip about who was dating who or who was flunking out or any of that crap best pals pass the time doing. Sure, I was okay talking to her and looking at her, because Sheila had this great personality and was oh so good looking, but my ultimate goal was to get my hands on her some sweet day, and I was driving myself nuts trying to figure out exactly how to do it.

I don’t think it was any big secret. Any fool could see how I doted on her and couldn’t stay away from her. It almost got to be a joke the way I followed her around all the time. I saw people grinning at me sometimes, like maybe they felt sorry for me or were waiting for me to make my big romantic move just for their entertainment, probably, I figured, so they could see me get shot down in flames.

I knew all this, but as the year passed and I grew more accustomed to being in waiting for Sheila it didn’t bother me so much. It became sort of a natural thing. I didn’t know how it was going to turn out in the end, but I’d accepted the premise that if the Fates decreed for something to go on between me and Sheila Schutt I at least had to stick around and see what happened. I was going to have a front row seat when it all came down.

Not that I wasn’t plotting the entire time. I was resigned to the fact that no sudden explosions or earth-trembling moments were going to suddenly happen to unite Sheila and me, no high romantic cinematic scene

coming along like we were William Holden and Kim Novak dancing in 'Picnic' or Liz Taylor and Montgomery Clift making out on a terrace in 'A Place in the Sun' and it was all in the stars, but simply this sole conviction I carried within myself that somehow some magical instance might possibly be out there on the horizon, and it was up to me to be present and completely prepared when it came along.

I thought about it constantly. I weighed every possibility.

Being out on the fringes awaiting my turn was bad enough, but what was worse was when some strange guy would come along and start to take a shine to Sheila and thrust himself into her path with me present, and there I'd be, left with the choice of either standing by as Sheila's faithful friend or disappearing and going off somewhere to seethe and imagine what might be happening between them without me around, a river of jealousy like white water rapids in my heart gushing along while I plotted out plans to eliminate my competition from the scene.

I wasn't accustomed to being dark and diabolical. All my life I'd prided myself on how I could get along with anybody. But now that was all in the past, before Sheila. I was consumed by a green-eyed monster and it was everything I could do to hide it. There wasn't a day that went by when I wasn't engulfed by brooding and dark thoughts whenever the least thing occurred. All a stranger had to do was look Sheila's way and I'd start down the road to self-bile and poisonous feelings. Like I say, I'd never been that sort of person before and it grieved me that each and every day I was growing more into the persona.

But the good thing about me—and there are a few good attributes I've got going, because it's not like I'm a terrible person—is I never was one of those guys who flew off the handle without a hint of provocation and did something rash and unforgiveable. I wasn't one to make scenes or start fights or dig myself into a

hole where I couldn't get back up on level ground. Now I might get upset and pissed off and torn to pieces, but unless you were Sigmund Freud or Sherlock Holmes you'd never be able to detect it. I'd keep it private.

I'd been practicing being steadfast and loyal to Sheila a few months when she started dating this guy named Greg Breeding. There wasn't but one male dorm at Columbia State then, which at that time was about the size of a community college, so there weren't that many kids living on campus, and there were only a few fraternities and sororities. But Greg Breeding was like the alpha male of the entire school. He was an officer in a bunch of clubs and third baseman on the baseball team and seemed to always appear in every picture in the school newspaper or the annual or the promotional brochures that showed prospective students what a great place Columbia State was to get a degree from and how the place was full of handsome guys like Greg who were going to go on from graduation and be big humongous successes in whatever they chose to do in life.

Now what I really wanted to do was present Mr. Greg Breeding with a bonafide Knuckle Sandwich, which was of course unacceptable behavior on my part, so I had to stand idly by with a smile frozen on my face and act like Greg was a welcome addition to the social scene. The good thing was I was able to control my urges and not do anything stupid. The bad part was Greg had staying power. I thought for a while how a guy like him who was used to getting what he wanted all the time without ever having to wait for it might finally get impatient wooing Sheila day after day and move on to greener pastures, but that wasn't the case. It started to look like he was going to stick around for the long haul.

I had to come up with a plan to persuade him to relocate.

What I decided on bordered on brilliant. I figured I couldn't do anything too revolutionary or caveman-like, such as using a lead pipe and waylaying the living shit out of Greg and his handsome features--nothing like

that was acceptable during those days of Peace and Love--so I had to get more creative in my quest to rid the atmosphere of him. Since I wasn't going to be able to beat him up or kick his ass in the manner I wanted, I decided the best way to rush his departure was by providing him the means and a reason to leave on his own accord.

There was a girl in my Psychology of Teaching class who unfailingly showed up at any and every campus event with a smile on her face and a goodly portion of her anatomy on display for every guy to see. Talk about some female getting labeled as hot to trot--this was the girl with her picture in the encyclopedia. I knew about her, not because I'd sampled her wares personally, but because I had eyes and powers of observation and I could tell what her game was without having to study it.

Her name was Kathy Butler, and I decided that even if I wasn't ever going to be confused with Dolly Levi that Kathy and Greg would be a heck of a match if I could get such a thing done.

I went to work making sure the two of them got to know each other. I made certain Kathy was always around, invited her to go with us to eat or hang out at the student center after classes. Like I say, she was already addicted to being present for anything going on around campus anyway, so it was pretty easy to maneuver her whereabouts toward Greg. Not that I'm a good judge of character or anything, but there were sparks flying from the first time the two of them got thrust together by yours truly. I took a lot of pleasure watching events unfold, congratulating myself on being so smart and devious.

Sheila, as I've mentioned, was certainly no slouch in the looks department, being one of those girls who got prettier the more you looked at her, but there was a discernable difference between her and a hot little

number like Kathy Butler. Sheila you wanted to take home to Mother; Kathy you wanted to take to a motel, the very first one you came to driving down the road.

Kathy Butler was a self-starter and a go-getter, not the kind of girl who'd demurely wait around for a guy to start the courtship process and make advances in his own sweet time, so it didn't take long for her to start wooing Greg over to her side of the street. Initially I'd planned on having a small dalliance with Kathy myself, just enough of one to perhaps make Sheila take notice and spark a tiny fringe of jealousy, but it didn't take long to see that wouldn't be necessary. Besides, the truth is if I'd tried anything sexual with Kathy back then I'd have been eaten alive and spit out on the floor for lack of experience, so it was better for pros like Kathy and Greg to go at each other without outside interference from me. I figured it would be like the Clash of the Titans or something. Somebody would win and somebody would lose, but the results wouldn't matter, for my goals in the end would be accomplished.

It turned out to be a tie. From the first moment Greg and Kathy laid eyes upon each other it was lust at first sight. They were magnets. They couldn't keep their hands off each other or make their bodies stay apart. It was super glue-like bonding and instantaneously torrid in pitch, so much so I couldn't believe the two of them hadn't found each other before this, because now that they had there was no separating them.

I suppose it was one of those things that was always meant to be, because it wasn't that long before they were engaged and married, a courtship that took all of three months. The last I heard they were still together, probably still grateful as hell to me for introducing them to each other.

So, I was successful at removing Greg Breeding from the scene. I don't think his absence ever truly bothered Sheila much, probably because she had some acumen about her, with higher standards than any of the other girls I'd encountered by then, so Greg was really not any great loss. I almost wished she'd lower those ideals a little so a guy like me could slip into the equation of romantic consideration, but I told myself it was still just a matter of me being patient and waiting for my time to come.

Don't tell me God never listens to prayers, because my number finally came up.

I had five classes scheduled spring semester. Oddly enough, four were with Sheila, which was no coincidence. I followed her into every class, which included Drama Two.

The big deal about Drama Two was the staging of a play that would run the week before finals and graduation. The play wasn't that big of a deal in the overall scheme of things as far as campus events went, but for all the students looking to hone their egos and get a good grade it was pretty nerve-wracking and pressurized. Just so everybody in the Fine Arts Department could get involved—the English Department, Music, Speech and Drama—the powers that be decided on “Romeo and Juliet” as the play that year. I suppose they thought with the name recognition of Shakespeare's most famous play, coupled with the arrival of spring and everyone involved being young with fancies mostly leaning toward love anyway, that the attendance would be higher with all those factors in play.

It didn't take long for the Drama Department head, Dr. Squires, to settle on Sheila as Juliet. This came as no surprise to anyone, since the old pervert had spent the better part of the semester fawning over Sheila at practically every class. Sometimes I'd sit in his classroom and get disgusted as hell watching him focus his lesson solely Sheila's way. He'd stand in front of her with this rapt look on his face and a twinkle in his eye and go on

and on to her exclusively like there was nobody else around. If it hadn't been such a pathetic display of over-the-hill male vanity it would have been funny.

So, Sheila was Juliet, and then there were auditions for the other roles. There were only five or six major speaking parts—Romeo, of course, being the biggest one—and what with Sheila being Juliet and in a bunch of scenes that required caressing and kissing between the two title characters, I made it my goal to win the role of Romeo, no matter what, hell or high-water. It didn't matter I had no acting experience to fall back on and I wasn't doing it for the grade either. I just wanted the chance to get my hands on the actress playing Juliet.

I read and re-read the play. I bought a spoken-word LP and listened to it constantly. There was no such thing as Blockbuster then, so I couldn't rent a version of the movie and study it that way, but I did discover an 8mm of it at the downtown library starring Leslie Howard and Norma Shearer and sat in a booth nights at a time watching it. I even studied the TV Guide and found the same version coming on at four in the morning on a UFC station and set my alarm and got up and watched it again. I told myself if I didn't get to be Romeo it sure as hell wasn't going to be for lack of trying.

Generally, I don't set my sights and aspirations so high, which is a shame really, because if I ever put as much effort into the rest of my life like I did becoming Romeo that year I'd be living quite the successful existence by now. But I guess that's all a lot of here and there.

I did win the part, which was a pretty fulfilling moment for me, but what was even better than that was I could tell that Sheila had wanted me to get it all along. She always smiled during my tryouts, which she didn't do when some other guy was up there busting his chops. She was genuinely happy we'd be doing the play together—I don't think I imagined that.

Casting was completed and the production duties were assigned. Rehearsals began the week after Spring Break, giving us three weeks of preparation. Then there would come the string of performances the week before classes ended and final exams began.

We rehearsed twice each day. I found out there was a lot more to acting than simply remembering lines and when to say them; you had to know where to be and how to stand and what to do when there was action taking place, like the swordfight between Tybalt and Romeo, or how to fall down and die after drinking poison, or—and this is the one I found the hardest to learn—how to climb a garden wall and make out with the fair Juliet while balanced precariously on the platform holding you up.

But it never bothered me too much practicing the balcony scene over and over.

The play was being held in a small auditorium—they didn't call it the Wee Theatre for nothing—so the builders had to be economical in what they put together for sets. They fashioned a swimming pool into a town fountain, covered bicycles with cloth for horses and nailed plywood together with a painted background and some hidden steps to serve as the balcony for the most famous scene in the play. Once I learned how to position my feet on the balcony with only one pale spotlight in the darkness illuminating me as Romeo and taught myself how to not misstep on the hidden ladder and take a tumble six feet downward to the regular stage and how to not slip where I'd have to grab the makeshift balcony railing and hold on for dear life while I dangled there the entire scene became magically realistic. All it took was me ascending ten feet and getting to my spot without busting my ass. It was a challenge, all right, all that climbing and maneuvering with little light to see by, knowing all the while there was a preponderance of folks out in the audience just waiting and wishing for me to slip and plummet and bash my brains out all for the sake of comic relief, but harrowing as it was, I

persevered, knowing that by risking life and limb, for exposing my limited acting ability to the world and displaying my talent for making a fool out of myself to lookers-on, the ordeal would be worthwhile. My reward would be far beyond anything else I might experience in the days to come, because for six evenings and an afternoon matinee I would be Romeo, and for those blessed starry moments I would be allowed to hold the Juliet of my dreams in my arms.

My life had never been better, and I knew even then it never would be again.

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For a week I was the lucky guy who got to scamper up a garden wall and take Sheila Schutt into my arms and whisper poetical sweet nothings in her ear and kiss her passionately under an artificial moon while an audience watched. At first I was paranoid about people watching my romantic technique, but before long I became a seasoned professional and forgot all about them. As far as I was concerned folks could bring cameras in and take pictures if they wanted—it wasn't going to deter me from relishing the opportunity a benevolent Jehovah had bestowed upon me.

Every Shakespearian Tragedy protagonist has a flaw though, and if you put your finger on Romeo's you'd identify it as his unwillingness to be patient and allow the events of life to occur in their own good time. Since I was involved in some kind of drama of my own making, my pursuit of Sheila Schutt, it was in the stars I would have a tragic flaw too. Looking back on it now, it's plain as day mine was I was a guy with stars in his eyes who ignored reality whenever possible. But when reality reared its ugly head, I was also a realist who saw it coming with twenty-twenty vision.

By the fourth night of our run I'd begun debating in my head whether Sheila was feeling what I was feeling during the performances or if she was just acting. There was a part of me that wanted to believe what was going on in the play was also coming into fruition in real life, but I had a voice inside me saying to reflect back on my own personal history in matters like this, to think of how the only times I'd ever been successful in situations with females before was when somebody had fixed me up on a blind date with somebody who was as desperate for affection as I was. I thought of games of Spin the Bottle and other forms of dumb luck with strange girls in out-of-the-way places who were always second-tier to the Sheilas of the world. I wasn't a thoroughbred; I wasn't in the same league as some people, I'd always known that. I wasn't capable of completing romantic races in top-notch competition. In the end I always finished last.

I had Sheila Schutt in my arms every night for a week, but no matter how hard I tried I couldn't for the life of me convince myself she wasn't putting on an act during all those whispers and vows and lengthy kisses and passionate embraces. I knew what was going on between us couldn't be real because it was me who was up there with her on the stage. There was no abiding belief inside me that thought an angel like Sheila Schutt was going to fall in love with a guy like me, for I was not then and never would be a member of the world she inhabited. I would never be capable of occupying with any aplomb the entrances and exits of her real life.

That's why when the girl who played the part of Rosalind drifted my way during the play's run I made myself ask her out to a movie as an alternative to the disappointment I knew was awaiting me, and very soon, as I'd somehow suspected, she and I became a couple. I forced myself to choose her before Sheila chose someone instead of me.

Why did I do it? Why did I give up?

Well, the girl was a Vickie, and though she was nowhere near being Sheila, I was at least comfortable enough with her to not feel unworthy of even being with her on the same planet. After the performance of the Sunday matinee, that last show, I left with her and that was it. I was never to hold Sheila Schutt in my arms again.

I'd made the choice to soften my fall.

Sheila

I have never been an impulsive person.

All my life I can't ever remember being overly-enthralled by anything right from the outset. I don't get giddy or beside myself often. Even as a little girl I don't recall becoming that excited or head-over-heels over what I found under the tree at Christmas or inside some package I unwrapped for my birthday. No, I always received what came my way with an air of calm caution, as if whatever the occasion was or whatever the item given me happened to be I had to study and evaluate it first. There had to be a moment to take everything in and see if what was before me was a good fit and worthy of further attention, or if I should simply regard it as a momentary diversion and move on.

The waning performances of the play arrived. I think it was on Thursday night when I first started to feel something inside me turn toward Owen. I'd known him a while by then and he'd become a part of my social circle, one of the gang, so to speak, but I'd never thought of him in any romantic way. He was just a friend, that's all. But I guess after all the rehearsals and the week's performances Owen and his arms and his



kisses began to get to me, and I all at once felt myself gravitating his way. But the thing was, when I sensed myself drawing nearer to Owen, at the same time it seemed he was moving away from me.

I knew Vickie had her eye on him, that she'd been enamored of him a while. She had earlier won the audition for the part of Rosalind, which was just a minor role. Rosalind, in case no one remembers, was the girl Romeo was initially struck with until he set his eyes on Juliet, and then Rosalind was history and appeared no more. But it didn't work like that outside the play. Instead of disappearing and allowing Owen as Romeo to pursue me as Juliet, Vickie didn't fade into oblivion. She was instead always backstage and around Owen at every chance. When we went out to eat after rehearsals and performances she'd be there, always managing to get a seat beside Owen. I saw the way she smiled at him and laughed at every word he said, the way she hung on him and brushed against him like she was sending messages his way, but by the time it dawned on me what was happening it was too late. I didn't even have time to be jealous.

They started disappearing together and becoming an item toward the end of the play's run, and by Sunday they were a couple.

I don't recall who it was that told me—it was a couple of years after graduation—Owen and Vickie got married. I'd lost track of the two of them by then; it was like a lot of my friends seemed to disappear after the play that year, and the next year I was always off somewhere student teaching. I never saw much of Owen or Vickie after the curtain came down that last matinee.

Tonight's maybe the third or fourth time I've seen him around. He doesn't look much different these days. He seems to dress the same, sneakers and jeans and a tee shirt. His hair is still long. About the only thing new is he wears glasses now, wire-rims that make him look like James Joyce.

I don't see Vickie anywhere in the audience. I wonder if Vickie is even in the mix anymore.

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Owen

Act Four's beginning. Everybody's had their ice cream and been to the restroom, the lights have flashed on and off as a signal intermission is over, and folks are headed back to their seats.

Everybody but me. I'll wait here until the lights go back down.

I stand off to the side of the stage and take another look at Sheila, one last lingering study until I run into her the next time, at some college production maybe or a movie theatre lobby or next year's Shakespeare in the Park. I could walk over now and say hello, but after we finish talking about the play I suspect there wouldn't be much more to say.

I guess 'Romeo and Juliet' is about all we have in common these days, sad to say. It's a shame, because once upon a time we were such good friends.