

THE SHAKESPEAREANS

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Stillman taught English in our middle school. He wasn't anyone's favorite but he was an okay sort and never gave out much homework, and there was something nice about the way he'd get all worked up and go on about *The Old Man and the Sea* and *The Odyssey* and Emily Dickinson the way he did. One summer we heard his wife took their baby and left him a note saying she was going through some difficult things and needed some space and also it wasn't his baby and she was moving across town to be with her true love, who was named Clive. Stillman took it hard. By the time school started up in the Fall he was drinking a lot, and he'd grown a crazy beard. The drinking was pretty bad, but that beard was nice. We all loved that beard. It was thick and full of snarls and mostly white even though Stillman was just in his forties. He took to wearing a bathrobe to class too, and it wasn't one of them nice bathrobes. You could tell that bathrobe had been around a good while. You just knew that bathrobe had some stories to tell.

At first Stillman spent a lot of time looking out the window and drinking from a thermos and talking about his wife and his baby and Clive, wondering what they were doing right at that moment. Stillman had a good imagination too. Like for example he'd imagine them all on a hayride together, or navigating a topiary maze, or taking sailing lessons, and he'd go into maybe too much detail about the sweet smell of the hay bales, and about the sound of the wind rustling against the topiary leaves in autumn, and about the lonely cries of the gulls overhead as his baby boy grew to manhood and learned nautical terms like mains'l and lee and starboard from the sailing boat captain, who

Stillman said was probably named Jimbo. Jimbo had his own story of tragedy and redemption, centered around an opium addiction and the prostitute with a heart of gold who saved him while he was stationed in Thailand after the war, and so on.

This was better than regular schoolwork and we all started to wonder ourselves what would become of Jimbo, but we knew it wasn't strictly speaking a good thing, and we were relieved when he stopped talking about Clive and the rest of them. But he didn't go back to teaching. He'd only spend the whole class staring out at the highway beside the school, sipping from his thermos and reading poems aloud while he stroked his glorious beard. We didn't recognize the poems but they all sounded pretty grim. They all sounded like the kind of poems you'd read before you took a hammer to your eye, or waded into the river with your pockets full of stones. We'd tell him things would be okay and maybe he ought to read us some more uplifting poems or just let us read silently maybe, but he'd wave us away and tug on his bathrobe and say we needed to learn to appreciate the sublime beauty of Death's rapturous embrace, for all that lives must die, passing through nature to eternity. And more of the same. So we didn't have a lot of confidence that Stillman was going to make it through the winter.

We walked in the classroom the first day back after the Christmas holiday to find Ms. Ives behind the desk. She said the school had to let Stillman go and she was taking his place for the rest of the school year. Ms. Ives' oldest boy, Bert, had just got sent to prison for holding up a liquor store in Portsmouth to pay off a business debt to some gangsters in Atlantic City. So she was kind of bitter and melancholy about it. She said it wasn't going to be an easy year for any of us, including her, but mostly us. As soon as

class ended, I went down to see Principal Davis with Wallace and Libby to plead for the school to take Stillman back.

I told Principal Davis that Stillman was the best teacher in the damn school, and when that didn't sound convincing I said that Stillman was the only reason Wallace wasn't more illiterate.

"Is that true?" Principal Davis asked.

Wallace shrugged, and said he was still kind of illiterate.

I said, "But he'd be *more* illiterate, is the point."

Libby spoke up and said she thought people ought to get second chances, and that it'd teach us all a valuable lesson about forgiveness and whatnot if the school brought him back. I thought that was a nice touch and gave her a thumbs-up, but out of the way so Principal Davis wouldn't see it.

Principal Davis sat back in his chair, eyes going from me to Libby to Wallace, who was looking down at the floor. Damn Wallace and his damned honest face.

"And this, of course," Principal Davis said, "has nothing to do with Ms. Ives."

"We're crazy for Ms. Ives," I said. "Ms. Ives is an angel."

"We all wish our own mothers were like Ms. Ives," Libby said. "Because she's so punctual, and because it's never hard to hear what she's saying because her voice carries so good." She went on to say that sometimes she cries at night thinking about how her own mom can't hold a candle to Ms. Ives. Wallace opened his mouth to say something then, so Libby pinched him to shut him up. Wallace can't lie worth a damn.

Principal Davis told us he appreciated all that, but there wasn't anything he could do. He said he couldn't even think about taking Stillman back unless Stillman got himself rehabilitated.

"How rehabilitated does he have to be exactly?" I asked.

Principal Davis said he didn't know how to answer that question. So we left.

After school I discussed things with Libby and Wallace. I said, first off, that Wallace was no longer invited to join us on these particular kinds of missions, and Wallace said he had to agree. They both had to go home, so I said I'd check on Stillman and assess his mental state and his potential for redemption and so forth. I didn't feel like going home anyway. My stepdad Kyle was between jobs so he had a lot of free time on his hands, and he liked to lecture me about the leftists and the blacks and the immigrants and the gays and the Papists taking down the country. I didn't know what leftists and Papists were. But Libby was black, so that talk sounded stupid to me. Plus Wallace told me he might be gay but he needed more time to think it over, and there was nobody more hopelessly good-natured and honorable than Wallace. So I decided Kyle was just basic ignorant, and I liked to keep my distance from him.

Stillman answered the door in his bathrobe. There were potato chips in his beard and he was holding a whiskey bottle in one hand, a carving knife in the other.

I told him we all just wanted to check on him to make sure his rehabilitation was on schedule so he could come back to school. One of the potato chips fell out of his beard and landed on the front step, so we both looked down at it for a second. I was hoping he wasn't going to pick up that potato chip, and thank god he didn't. He only

grunted and walked back inside the house. But he left the door open so I walked in after him.

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I suspected that Stillman's place had seen better days. Liquor bottles and comic books and potato chip bags littered the floor. In the corner of the living room by the window, there was a Christmas tree at least two feet taller than the ceiling, so it was bent over at the top, shameful-like. There was a gingerbread house ornament weighing down one of the upper branches, and on the roof it said STILLMAN HOME SWEET HOME.

Otherwise there weren't any decorations, which made some fair amount of sense. If I was Stillman and the first decoration I put up after my wife ran off with the drummer from Snotglass was a STILLMAN HOME SWEET HOME gingerbread house, I probably wouldn't keep decorating either.

Stillman disappeared into the gloom beyond the living room, so I followed him. I was glad the room wasn't well-lit because I didn't need to see what I was crunching underfoot. I found him in the kitchen. He was staring down at two big sheets of paper unrolled side-by-side on the kitchen table. I came up beside him to see what he was working on.

On one of the sheets, he'd drawn out something like an architectural diagram. I couldn't tell what it was exactly but he'd clearly put some thought into it, noting all the

dimensions and angles. It was a big circle with a smaller rectangle cut into one end, and then little hallways dividing up another, outer circle like the spokes on a wheel. It reminded me of something. Wallace liked to design and build things and he went through a phase when he wanted to build a baseball stadium. So I said we'd need a baseball team then. We spent a couple weeks then thinking through who we'd want to play for us, with Libby suggesting a team that was 100% left handed, and Wallace reconfiguring the outfield to maximize our advantage against right handers, and all of us debating the team name, with the Dragonflies narrowly beating out the Six-Eyed Sand Spiders, which Wallace said were so venomous that one of them could kill a rabbit in five to twelve hours. In the end we agreed that, as much as we liked the name Six-Eyed Sand Spiders, we liked rabbits too much. Stillman's drawing reminded me a bit of Wallace's ballpark drawings for the Dragonflies. Hundreds of seats arranged in a circle around some kind of field, or maybe a stage.

One Stillman's other sheet was a schematic drawing for a hydraulic braking system. It was labeled "CLIVE'S CAR." Stillman had circled the master cylinder with red marker and drawn an arrow to it with the words "C5 EXPLOSIVE CHARGE ATTACHED." At the bottom, he'd drawn a stick figure family with a woman, a baby, a bearded man, and another man with little Xs for eyes.

"I think maybe we need to step back for a minute," I said.

"Who are you?" Stillman asked.

"I went through that already," I said.

He considered me through half-lidded eyes, and said, “Thou elvish-mark’d, abortive, rooting hog. I do remember you.” Then he scowled and sipped from his bottle.

I asked him if he wanted to get his job back.

“Thou art a boil!” he roared. “A plague sore.”

“You can’t get her back by killing someone,” I said. “That’s not any kind of plan at all.”

He said nothing to this, just blinked at me with glassy-eyed resentment. Then he wandered back into the murky living room, where he sat down on the sofa and wept into his potato chips.

I stood and thought about what to say. Libby was better at the uplifting kinds of speeches than me. I said for sure he’d fallen on hard times through no fault of his own, and that things appropriately looked bleak. I pointed out that sane people didn’t grow beards like his. I agreed that his place smelled like death, and he probably couldn’t even afford to stay there much longer on account of losing his job, and it couldn’t be easy to think about his wife and his illegitimate baby taking up with Clive, who was actually pretty well-liked in town, plus he was the drummer in a band called Snotglass, which was admittedly an awesome name for a band. But it was important to remember that he was only a drummer, I said, and then I said I wasn’t sure exactly where I was going with all of that, but by then Stillman was passed out on the couch, so I was pretty relieved.

I went back to the kitchen and looked at those drawings again. An idea was coming into my head. I could feel it trying to grow into something, and I thought maybe with some care it could grow into something fine. So I rolled up both of Stillman’s

drawings and tucked them under my arm, and walked to the door. Stillman was still passed out but I told him I was borrowing his drawings anyway, and that I'd be back, and that he should just hold steady.

“Sure,” Wallace said the next day, when I asked him what I had to ask him. We were in the courtyard before school, sitting on the grass with Stillman's unrolled diagram spread out in front of us. “Anything's possible. If someone gives us enough money. And we get lots of help. And we get all kinds of permits to build the thing.”

“But what if nobody gives us any money?” I asked. “And we don't get any permits or anything?”

“Less possible,” he said, after a beat.

“Less isn't none,” I said.

Wallace sat back in the grass and gave me a look I recognized, with his head tilted to one side and his eyes half-shut, like he was measuring me up, trying to read my soul.

“You're trying to read my soul,” I said.

“Somebody's got to,” he said. “Why's this matter?”

I said I didn't know, but it did matter. I said I wasn't any good at knowing the reason for things, and Wallace knew that. I said we'd known each other since we were babies and I shouldn't have to tell him, because he ought to know himself. I said I knew he probably thought it was about Danny, even if he wasn't going to *say* it was about Danny, which wasn't fair because I hadn't even brought Danny up one way or another, just like I never bring up Danny, which I knew bothered Wallace but it wasn't any of his



business, and he had to just trust that I'd figure things out on my own even if I took the long way and the stupid way like I always do.

"Just asking," said Wallace. "Anyway, yeah. I'll do it."

Next was Libby. I knew she'd be tougher. I met up with her at lunchtime in the same courtyard, and explained.

"That's not an explanation," she said. "It's not even, like, sane."

"Wallace didn't mind," I said.

"Because he gets to build something, that's why. Even if it makes no sense."

"Why doesn't it make sense?"

She rolled just one of her eyes, the left one, which is a cool thing she can do. I'd give anything to be able to roll just one of my eyes. "Because here's why," she said. "Your plan is to put Wallace in charge of building a theater in the woods based on Stillman's drawing."

"Yes," I said.

"And we figure out how to get all the materials we need, probably by stealing."

"*Possibly* by stealing," I said.

"And we have to get other kids to help out, without being able to pay them anything."

"Maybe," I said.

"And we have to do this without any adults noticing anything strange going on, and without any of the kids we get to help telling anyone else what we're doing, and without the Parks department figuring out we're building on public land."

“You’re saying it all like a crazy person,” I told her, “so of course it’s going to sound crazy.”

“Then after all that,” she said, ignoring me, and really working herself up now, “when we’ve got this illegal *theater* out in the woods, we’re supposed to perform *plays*. So that everyone in town can come, probably on some perfect early summer *day* of all things, and see what a great job Stillman did by teaching us and *inspiring* us and so forth. And the school board’s just gonna be so impressed that they give him his *job* back. Oh, *and* we get all this done before the school year ends, because at that point Stillman probably moves away and the school hires someone else anyway.”

“None of those individual things you said,” I told her, “are 100% impossible.”

“It’s not a plan,” she said. “It’s not anything except batshit. I don’t guess it’s because you miss Danny and you think if you do something crazy and it works, it’ll bring him back.”

“That would be like me,” I admitted. “But no.”

The truth was that something about seeing Stillman like that bothered me. I didn’t know for sure what it was. But I was troubled and it seemed to me, without any good reason, that Stillman falling on hard times was bad for all of us. I think because he wasn’t someone who ever hurt a person or had a bad word to say, and because he was always in good spirits before and we all took it for granted. And I thought it wasn’t right that the world should be this way, taking away people’s spirit like that.

Libby studied my face and said, “You’re thinking about the world now.”

“You can’t tell someone’s thinking about the world just by looking at their face,” I said. “That’s not a thing that happens.”

“Well what sort of play would we do?” she asked.

I thought about it. “Nothing boring,” I said. “No Shakespeare.”

“Something with action,” she suggested.

“And adventure,” I said.

“Ghosts?” she asked.

I rolled my eyes, both of them. “Of course ghosts,” I said.

“I guess sword fights too,” she said.

“Wallace’s dad has those swords. Nobody else is going to use them. Seems wrong *not* to have sword fights.”

She nodded, thinking. “And I guess there would have to be betrayals too, and storms, and unexpected reunions, and terrible tragedy. But some comedy bits too.”

“Now you’re talking. You practically wrote it already, Libby.”

The bell rang for the next period.

“Okay,” she said. “But you know it won’t happen like this. Now that we’ve laid it all out. Things don’t ever happen the way you lay them out. Not in real life.”

“We shouldn’t have laid it all out, damn,” I said. And I felt a little foolish then, because I could see that she was right. About all of it. Stillman was hopelessly deranged, we couldn’t get away with building a secret theater in the woods, Danny was still gone, and I didn’t like being in that house anymore, whether Kyle was there or not. There was a

part of me that wanted to hear Libby say *Well let's do it anyway* but that was just more foolishness. The world was just what it was, that's all.

“Let's do it anyway,” Libby said.