

INTRODUCTION

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Prague, The Egyptologist, Angelica, AND The Song Is You

If you do not feel the impossibility of this speech having been written by Shakespeare, all I dare suggest is that you may have ears—for so has another animal—but an ear you cannot have.

—SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE, about *Henry VI, Part One*

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Shakespeare never did this. He never did this.

—THE BLOW MONKEYS, “Don’t Give It Up”

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Believe me, my friends, that men, not very much inferior to Shakespeare, are this day being born on the banks of the Ohio.

—HERMAN MELVILLE

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Phillips himself evidently wanted to carry the performance outside the walls of the playhouse.

—STEPHEN GREENBLATT, *Will in the World*

1

I HAVE NEVER MUCH LIKED SHAKESPEARE. I find the plays more pleasant to read than to watch, but I could do without him, up to and including this unstoppable and unfortunate book. I know that is not a very literary or learned thing to confess, but there it is. I wonder if there isn’t a large and shy population of tasteful readers who secretly agree with me. I would add that *The Tragedy of Arthur* is as good as most of his stuff, or as bad, and I suppose it is plausible (vocabulary, style, etc.) that he wrote it. Full disclosure: I state that as the party with the most money to be made in this venture.

As a cab driver asked in an ironic tone when I told him I was contractually bound to write something about Shakespeare, “And what hasn’t been written about him yet?” Perhaps this: although it is probably not evident to anyone outside my immediate family and friends, my own career as a novelist has been shadowed by my family’s relationship to Shakespeare, specifically my father and twin sister’s adoration of his work. A certain amount of cheap psychology turns out to be true: because of our family’s early dynamics, I have as an adult always tried to impress these two idealized readers with my own language and imagination, and have always hoped someday to hear them say they preferred me and my work to Shakespeare and his.

Even as I write that—as I commit it to print and thereby make it true—I know it is ridiculous. I cannot really feel that I am in competition with this man born four hundred years to the day before me. There is nothing in the clichéd description of him as the greatest writer in the English language that should have anything to do with me, my place in literature, the love of my family, or my own “self-esteem,” to use an embarrassing word stinking of redemptive memoirs. I should be glad for the few lines of his that I like and think nothing of the rest, ignore the daffy religion that is the world’s mad love of him. (Or, in the case of those troubled folk who don’t think he wrote *Hamlet* or *Romeo and Juliet*, equally mad disbelief.)

I am not by nature a memoirist, any more than Shakespeare was. I am a novelist. But if you are to understand this play, its history, and how it came to be here, a certain quantity of my autobiography is unavoidable. Nobody comes off particularly well in the story of how we arrived here, except perhaps my sister, Dana. I certainly am not the hero. But I do have the legal right to occupy this discovery space outside the play for as long as I wish. No one may lay a red pen on me here, so if these turn out to be the last words of mine that Random House ever publishes, they will at least be true, and the record will be set straight, if only for a while, before it rewarps.

I will perform my contractual requirements—history, synopsis, editing, notes—but I have other things to say as well, and a few apologies to issue, before I creep offstage.

2

MY PARENTS LIVED TOGETHER until Dana and I were six. Memories of that early age are untrustworthy except as a measure of the predominant emotion at the time. When I summon images of the four of us together, I recall happiness: pervasive, aromatic, connected to textures and weather and faces. (I suspect those faces are not real memories, exactly. They are memory-animations of old photos I have, or imagined snapshots of old stories I've heard.)

My father emerges first as a man who conquered night, who never slept. This is not an uncommon idea children have of their parents: kids at five, six, seven have to go to bed when the adults are awake, and they wake to find those adults already in action. If you do not live with them again after this age, parents will survive in memory as creatures magically exempt from slumber. But my father was even more a figure of the night than that. I remember several occasions when he woke me in darkest black (perhaps only nine P.M., but by then a five-year-old is already deep beneath a wash of delta waves), excited to share some great news or show me some once-in-a-lifetime event. "Wake up, Bear! Bear! You have to see this. Wake up!"

I was asleep, my beloved solar-system book fallen on my chest, my fingers still voyaging over its black and starry cover. I was asleep, and then I was in his arms, flying from my bed, awake and asleep and back and forth, and then I was out on the wet lawn, still cradled in his arms, barely able to peel open my crusted eye, to look, at his whispered urging, into his tripodded, heaven-angling telescope's eyepiece. And there I saw Saturn, my favorite: ringed, unworldly, a giant top among specks of dust. And then he turned some dial, fiddled somehow with the telescope's lenses and settings, and he brought the view much closer, and I could see a dozen of Saturn's inhabitants, moving back and forth in their excitement, taking turns looking through their telescope, gesturing at what they saw, up in their own sky, amazed at the sight of me, trying to get my attention.

And then I was brought back to bed, and he kissed me back to sleep.

A little boy wakes from that and—first thing—consults with the most reliable and trusted person in his world for clarification. I asked my twin sister if she had had any dreams, as we often shared them in those suggestible days. “No, because Dad woke me up to see Saturn,” Dana replied matter-of-factly. “I love the rings. It’s the best planet. Except for Pluto.”

“No, Saturn’s better. Did you see the people?”

“Yeah, but Pluto’s better.”

This was as hotly as Dana and I ever disagreed about anything in those days.

Pancakes shaped like Saturn, pancakes shaped like Mickey Mouse, which, my father said, could occur accidentally. He would dramatically cover his eyes while dribbling the batter, and sure enough, every fifth pancake (we were five years old) was unmistakably Mickey. I used to take pleasure, even at that provably selfish age, in donating my Mickeys to Dana, and every time she thanked me with real amazement. I recall, too, a pancake with the uncanny profile of my mother, placed before her with a long kiss from the chef to the top of her head. “You’ve got butter on your nose,” he said, placing a dollop on her pancake’s leftmost tip.

(I made pancakes for my own kids in my day. Perhaps it was the Czech flour, but my repertoire consisted solely of ovals and Pollocks. Their Aunt Dana never did any better when she visited.)

Our mother took us to an exhibit of Dad’s paintings. She made us dress up. I had a little bow tie. Dana and I were allowed to walk around on our own, soda in paper cups, hand in hand, and we made each other laugh with stories about each painting, Dad’s and others in the group show. We sat on a wooden bench and watched our mother put her hand on our father’s back, his tumbleweed of black Einstein hair swaying slightly from the rotating floor fan. We blew bubbles in our 7UP, and I made fart sounds for Dana.

“Those last group shows,” my mother reported much later. “So depressing.”

But not for us. My father’s increasingly desperate and pathetic final efforts at being an acknowledged artist had no effect on me and Dana just yet. His anger at the world’s indifference was imperceptible to us,

and that is to his credit, or due to children's natural indifference. For us, the adult world was soda on wooden benches, paintings and stories, midnight glimpses of Saturnine astronomers, magic pancakes. Our father amazed us and won our love not because he treated us like children, but because we thought he was treating us like adults, and adulthood was just a much better childhood.

3

“IN SHAKESPEARE’S DAY, kids your age could speak Latin. Brains can soak up anything, but if you pour in Nancy Drew and TV shows, that’s all you’ll learn.” Our father started reading Shakespeare to us when we were six, and it worked for one of us: Dana was reading it to herself within a year. Her love and knack for Shakespeare were, to my eye back then, maybe a little forced—at least at the beginning, an obvious effort to please Dad. But dye sets in, and what was once an affectation can become our truest self.

More significantly, this was the first time Dana and I did not agree about something important. I just didn’t like the stuff; Dana did. It is extraordinary to note it now, but I don’t think that had ever happened before. Still, I saw that it bound her to Dad, so I faked it for a while. That didn’t last, and soon I started wandering off when that fat brown book came off the shelf. This was a little—not to overstate it—traumatic for both me and Dana, I think, because, not long after the realization of this disorienting distance between us, Dad “went away” for the first time. Somehow those two events seemed related. They still do.

My father’s arrest and conviction that first time was—to a seven-year-old—the bloody birth of awareness that the adult world is dangerous, a place where you could lose badly, and where my father was by no means in control. “Your father has to go away for a while,” says the brave and tearful mother hustled over from subconscious central casting when recollection fails.

At that age, one is too selfish to understand it as her loss or even *his* loss or his imprisonment at all, only as *our* loss, and particularly *mine*.

The child is punished with the father's absence, and some arbitrary evil is to blame—not Dad, not yet. Possibly the child committed some crime himself and so has had his father taken from him? I'm told I cried for many nights running, scouring my conscience for the nasty thing I did, and even—God help me—trying to read Shakespeare as penance.

Fortunately, I had a twin. Twins enjoy what the rest of humanity craves: a perfect communion with another person, the absence of all loneliness. We are born with that certainty, two yolks in a single shell. We carry it with us into consciousness. When self-consciousness is born in us, we feel part of something and someone else larger than ourselves. (We pay a terrible price, however. Unlike the rest of you, we know what it feels like and we have to give it up, breaking eggs to join you in this vain search for an omelette to absorb us.)

Dad wasn't gone long, that first time, and then he came back to live with us. But he went away again less than two years later.

When we were eight or nine, after our parents were separated but before our mother remarried, she woke us early one winter Saturday. It was still dark, but that's not saying much in a Minnesota January. She had already sprinted out to the garage to unplug the car's core heater from the wall outlet, start the engine, and leave it to warm up as she sprinted back inside. Forced to eat and dress as if it were a school day, I crept along unwillingly, like a snail, but Dana was quickly ready, refusing food and hurrying into her coat and lunar footwear. We rode through the Minneapolis cold as the sky bleached and streetlights winked. We drove out of the city, through two-story suburbs, then one-story, through dreary flatland, past white and hibernating farms until we reached daylight and the minimum-security facility, where we were led into the Family Room, as that windowless, barred space of gray concrete was whimsically named.

Our mother pointed out the table where we were meant to sit, and then she stepped away. I may be misremembering, or she may have said hello to him when I wasn't looking. Either way, we were to present our belated Hanukkah gifts to him while she stayed far across the room reading the newspaper.

Our father was brought out to us. I recall being disappointed that he wasn't shackled. I don't think I wanted him to suffer (although maybe I did; I don't underestimate children's preference for color over kindness). Rather, I was searching, I think, for some evidence of harsh treatment so that I could imagine rescuing him, or begin to accept that my crimes had led him to a dire and unjust end. Instead, his world just looked boring.

I had spent some allowance on modeling clay and made him a diorama: the four of us together in our house (three shoe boxes cut open and taped together), our hands joined in a circle around the kitchen table, upon which was spread a vast, if not entirely recognizable, clay feast. This work expressed many of my fixations at eight years old: a reunited family, food (I was in the midst of one of my chubby spells, which correlated pretty well with his jail time), and religion (a short-lived fever, but it was climbing fast that year). The sculpture had suffered a bit in the cold, and white cracks had shot through most of the furniture and figures. I felt a round of pre-crying trembles revving up in my face. My father thanked me, complimented the "evident skill and passion involved," pointed out his favorite parts, seemed pleased, I suppose. He promised me some lessons working with clay when he came home. He apologized that he couldn't keep the gift where he was but asked me to protect it for him. That's when my tears broke through the flimsy dam. I think my mother should have warned me that he wouldn't be allowed to keep the diorama. I snuffled my promise to guard it until he was set free.

By then Dana couldn't keep still another minute, and had no patience for me to have some emotional attack before her big moment. "Daddy, I have to give you mine now."

"Can't wait," he said, and I thought he meant he literally could not wait because the guards were coming to haul him away.

"You have to wait, Dad! She worked hard for you," I sputtered, rushing to protect Dana from heartbreak.

"Artie, it's okay: I can't wait, meaning I'm excited. Let's have it, Dana."

Her eyes were wide and she stood up at the table, her hands

clasped in front of her chest. She began Portia's big speech from *The Merchant of Venice*, Act IV, Scene i. She shouted it at first, directly at one of the startled corrections officers standing next to the grated door leading back to the cells. The guard actually put up with it, or was too surprised to stop her, for a few lines, from *The quality of mercy* until *Upon the place beneath* before he barked, "Little girl, sit your ass down and keep it quiet or we are done today."

Dana was never easy to cow; she was always much braver than I. She wasn't scared by this giant with a nightstick, but she didn't want to cause her dad any trouble or have her visit cut short. And so she surrendered her initial plan to recite the twenty-two-line monologue to the entire penitentiary Family Room, transforming it into the law courts of Venice. She had even picked out—she told me later, in the car ride home, weeping much more plentifully than I—which guard she intended to look at on line 197 with a piercing "therefore, *Jew*." Of course, we were Jewish, but that didn't mean she identified with Shylock or his vindictive interpretation of the law against the gentle Gentile merchant Antonio.

Shut down by the authorities, she composed herself and began again, more quietly. Too eager, too fast at first, she slowed down by the middle, and I watched them, from outside their circle of two, the two of them staring intently at each other in profile, an optical-illusion vase. My father's upper lip hid between his teeth, and he nodded slightly as he tapped—pop POP pop POP—his stained and chewed-up fingernails against the flecked Formica tabletop to keep his girl in tight iambic rhythm through the speech.

She came to the end: "*We do pray for mercy . . . This strict court of Venice / Must needs give sentence 'gainst that merchant there,*" opening her palms to Dad as if he were Antonio, persecuted by some vengeful Shylock. Dana looked at him with a naked desire for praise, but then something happened that I didn't understand for many years, if I understand it even now. My father took the next line (Shylock's). He groaned, rather than shouted, "*My deeds upon my head! I crave the law.*" He was turning the original meaning ("don't waste time with mercy, give me what my enemy owes me") into something else ("punishment is what I deserve"). It seems to me now that it was an apology of sorts

to his daughter, and an indulgence of his occasional taste for self-flagellation.

Despite her triumph performing an inconceivable task no eight-year-old could possibly do (reciting, probably flawlessly, twenty-two lines of gibberish), filling me with pride in her ability to thrill Dad, she was convinced she hadn't been good enough. That's what she murmured to me in the back of that old blue Plymouth Valiant, her mittened hand in mine, my orange down jacket stiff from her tears freezing on my shoulder while the car strained to heat up in the twenty-below Minnesota air (forty below with windchill), our faces red and tightly inexpressive from the cold, our fingers burning blue, the hard vinyl seats and useless twisted blue seat belts. Of course she was crying because of having to say goodbye to her father, again, already in his second short prison term of our young lives, and she was crying because our mother had never sat with him, spoken to him, acknowledged him. But Dana told me, years later, that she was also crying because she had just suffered a strange disillusionment, the grisly death of a childish fantasy: Shakespeare didn't crumble the walls, fell the guards, melt the system's heart. Shakespeare didn't fix everything, or anything, just gave a moment of pleasure that would linger on in two people's minds (she didn't think to include me or already knew better), and this was a thorned disappointment for the little girl prodigy, whose love for words and fantasy had far outgrown her ability to understand the real world.

"Enough, Dana, please. Enough," sighed our exasperated mother, tired of all the bawling.

4

DAD WAS OUT AGAIN the next year, 1973, when we were nine. In *The Tragedy of Arthur*, King Arthur is portrayed as a charismatic, charming, egocentric, short-tempered, principled but chronically impulsive bastard. He is a flawed hero, at best, who succeeds then fails as a result of his unique personality. Unable to find a solid self upon which to rely, he ricochets from crisis to crisis, never quite