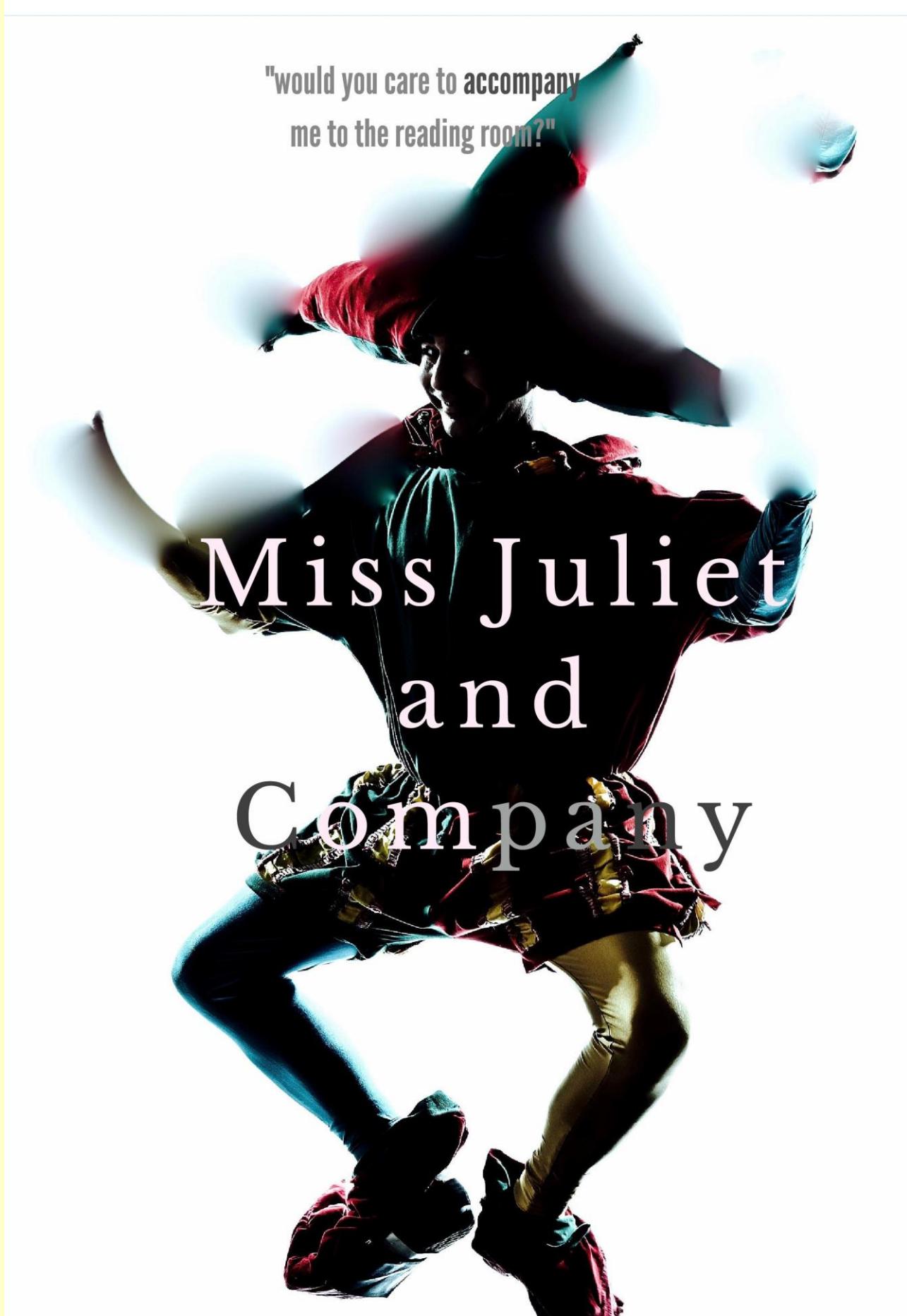


"would you care to accompany  
me to the reading room?"



# Miss Juliet and Company

A STORY BY WRITINGBRUSSELS

I

*For sound prologue click [here](#)*

**P**lease Miss Juliet,

would you care to accompany me to the reading room? -

The voice had been repeating the question for a while and Juliet was feeling uncomfortable. To start with, it was not Michael who was talking to her. She could feel his warm back touching hers and he was asleep, his breathing slow and deep.

“Miss Juliet, would you accompany me to the reading room?” the voice repeated.

She felt annoyed and turned over so she was now laying on her back. She thought that by doing so the dream would fade away and the voice would stop talking. She opened her eyes slightly into the darkness and closed them again.

“Please Miss Juliet. We should not spend more time on this silly game than necessary. Would you please get up and accompany me to the reading room now?”

Although still exquisitely polite, the voice had become more insistent, as if its owner was losing patience. Up until then Juliet had been thinking that she was dreaming, but now she could place the voice close to her, just by the side of the bed. Far too close.

“Please Miss Juliet, there is no reason for fear. I do not mean you any harm. If you accompany me to the reading room, this will be over very soon and you can go back to sleep. Let’s proceed.”

The voice was reassuring but it did not make her feel any less frightened. All this was just a nightmare, she thought, and would wake up and that voice would stop talking inside her head.

“Please Miss Juliet...”

The voice didn't finished its phrase because Juliet turned her face and opened her eyes. She closed them immediately, petrified. She had seen something she could not describe, she dare not to describe. Simply it could not be real. She felt like screaming but she couldn't. Her body became rigid and she was unable to move.

“Please Miss Juliet, you are braver than this! Just come down with me to the reading room!”

The voice had become imperious by now. She didn't want to obey, she wanted to remain in her safe bed and near to Michael, but couldn't stop herself from getting up. The wooden floor boards felt cold under her bare feet and she was trembling. The being was by the door, waiting. The shiny fog she had glimpsed before was changing shape and turning into something that looked like a man with long hair. His bearded face appeared briefly to dissolve again into a shimmering haze. Juliet followed it going down the stairs, which did not squeak under her weight. It felt as if time had stopped and nothing else was moving, except herself and the being, drifting smoothly in the air. They were approaching the reading room and she suddenly thought of Ophelia. She felt extremely relieved that her daughter was spending the night with her best friend from school. It was Ophelia who had named that small room on the ground floor as the reading room when they moved into the house.

“I can read here, Mummy”, she had said proudly.

She was three at the time and she was sitting in a little space between the unpacked boxes. Ten years had passed since then and most of their books had found their way there, as well as some of Michael’s model trains. Even her late father’s extensive collection of plays had found their home on the top shelves. The room was always messy, with bills and magazines scattered around, but she found it pleasant to enjoy a cup of tea there after work. But something bizarre was happening in the reading room now and she froze in the middle of the stairs.

“Miss Juliet, please come down. We are all your friends here, please join us. As I said, you are braver than this.”

The voice was trying to be reassuring again and she felt embarrassed to be so scared, but the bluish light coming out of the door and the whispers she was hearing, were just too much for her to bear. She breathed deeply trying to decide what to do. Her brain seemed still unable to work by itself and her feet started to descend the steps as if they were independent from her body. She let herself go.

The whispers stopped as she came into the reading room. She looked at them just trying to show all the courage she could grasp, which was not much. It was difficult to know how many of them were present. They all had the same quality of the one that had visited her in the bedroom, eerie and shiny masses that would curl into some sort of human shapes. She could glimpse some features that caught her attention. Beards and waxed moustaches would blend with spectacles and thick paste glasses. Ties, bow ties and

wide sleeves were mixed with long hair, boots, waistcoats, top hats and walking sticks. Others stayed temporarily rigid, like statues. That concoction brought an unexpected wave of familiarity that made her look at her father's plays collection on the top shelf.

"Well, Miss Juliet. I think you know now what all this is about."

The being that had awoken her had spoken softly. She almost felt that there was a smile in the voice, if that was possible.

"We were witnesses of a promise you made. I hope you remember - it continued."

The being had showed his bearded face while he spoke and then disappeared again into vapour. Juliet felt some tears welling up in her eyes when she heard a different voice.

"Miss Juliet, would you care to come with me to the rehearsal this Saturday afternoon?"

Her father's request would always be accompanied by a silly reverence that made her laugh. Her childhood weekends around props, coloured lightings, painted curtains and odd pieces of clothing flashed vividly in her memory. She hadn't thought about all that for a long time and was surprised by the bitter-sweet feelings that were aroused. The weekends with the amateur theatre group had been fun when she was little but things changed when she started to grow up. Seeing Elaine, her best friend at the time, kissing Roderick Ames backstage probably had something to do with it. Her homework was the first excuse that prevented her from going to the group gatherings. Later she would be seeing other friends and finally she simply stayed at home. Curiously, at the time, her dad stopped calling her Miss Juliet and

never did his silly reverence again. Theatre disappeared from her life and she didn't miss it.

“Miss Juliet, do you remember the promise you made to your father?”

She did remember well that Saturday afternoon, seven years ago. She wanted to go back home and have a rest before Ophelia and Michael came back from the cinema. Her father had been unusually quiet during her visit and had left her chatting to her mother in the kitchen. She passed by his study to say goodbye.

“Come in Miss Juliet, would you care to join me for a few minutes?”

She was surprised that he called her like that, but didn't say anything about it. He was reading one of the volumes of his collection of plays, as she had always seen him doing. Each book had a drawing or a photograph of the author on the first page. William Shakespeare, August Strindberg, Arthur Miller, Moliere and Aristophanes had faces she knew well.

“I think it would good if you went to see a play from time to time” he said unexpectedly - “You could bring Ophelia and Michael too. We could even go all together. Do you promise me to think about it?”

“Of course Dad”, she had said lightly “I'll phone you next week and you can recommend me a good production.”

She didn't understand why her father was talking to her about theatre after so many years but she didn't ask him either and left hurriedly. That night she received a distressed call from her

mother. Her father had had a heart attack and was at the hospital in intensive care. He died before she could get there.

"Well Miss Juliet. Did you ever go to see a play? Did you ever take your daughter and husband to see one?" the voice asked sternly.

Juliet didn't say anything. The shiny fogs curled rapidly in annoyance.

"Are there any good reasons not to see a play?" a different voice asked.

She wished she had a good answer to give, but mere trivialities came to her head.

"I think I may prefer to see a film", she thought to say, but regretted it instantly.

"Cinema... Rubbish! A new thing that they call art... And it is all made with computers these days. Just cold and canned technology. Nothing to do with the warmth of a live performance - said another voice, quite irritated."

"I am not sure if Ophelia would like it. None of her friends go to see plays - she tried to say, but words did not leave her mouth."

"Come on, dear Miss Juliet. You haven't even tried. And you made a promise, remember?" said the voice that had awoken her.

Juliet felt she desperately wanted to get away from the room and those beings that had emanated from her father's books. She could feel their anger and thought that she may appease them if she managed to find some tickets. She would have a look in the morning, but some doubts came into her head. It would be difficult to find a good production that the whole family would

like and even if she got that far, she would never know what tickets to buy. The expensive ones she could not afford and the cheaper ones may not allow a good enjoyment of the play. Those maps online with the seats distribution were puzzles she never managed to understand.

“Well Miss Juliet. Maybe we can help you there”, said the voice with kindness.

Juliet felt grateful and somehow relieved that the beings were understanding her efforts. Her fear was subsiding, shedding off her body like old bark from a tree trunk. She felt light, so light that her feet started to leave the floor.

“Miss Juliet, please don’t go yet”, said the voice, “We are not quite finished. Miss Juliet...”

She was floating in the air, she could see herself going up to the dark sky, cutting through the walls and the roof. She saw their house and the garden from above, everything covered by a white light and getting smaller and smaller. And then she stopped and started to fall fast, very fast. So fast that the vertigo squashed her stomach and she started screaming.

“Miss Juliet! Juliet!”

The weight over her shoulders was heavy and she couldn’t breathe. She opened her eyes, gasping for air. Michael was looking at her with a worried face.

“You were shouting, dear. Too much food and wine late at night, you know”, he said, now smiling.

He was dressed and ready to leave for his business trip.

“Bye darling. See you this evening”, he added and left after kissing her on her forehead.

She stayed in bed for a while after Michael was gone, allowing reality to take possession of the day's beginning. She heard the birds singing outside and a few voices in the street. Somebody was starting a car and the engine took a few attempts to respond. She only then realised that she had taken the day off work to go and help her mother move to an apartment. Her parents' house had been sold and she had to pick up the last boxes. She finally got up. The stairs squeaked happily when she went down to the kitchen as they always did. The reading room was bathed in a timid morning light and she felt a peculiar sense of relief. The coffee cup that Michael had left after his breakfast was still lying on the table. She picked it up to put it into the dishwasher when she saw something. She felt a sharp chill and jumped backwards, but not far enough. She could still see them from where she was standing, triumphantly present. Three tickets to see “Othello” in two days' time.

She sat on a chair and felt like crying.

II

*For sound prologue click [here](#)*

**M**ichael is just wearing his suit jacket.

He has left the coat at home, because he knows he would sweat too much on the train ride and feel uncomfortable when he arrives in Amsterdam for his meeting. Plus he is already having his first beer and it is warming up his chest like the cheerful chitter of the early birds this morning. Yes, it is a bit early for a beer, he admits to himself while he throws the empty bottle of Leffe into a bin not far from Gare du Midi. On the other hand: Is it? Did not workers in the past drink during construction hours to keep strong and willing? Even the Romans were sipping red wine all day and build a freaking empire.

He likes Gare du Midi for all its hidden spots, where you could hide things, slip past, drink a bottle of beer in the morning like a clochard and then step into the hall, past the smiling and reassuring soldiers with their slim guns and into the world of business travellers. Slowly sliding TGVs and Thalys with good-looking conductors checking your first-class ticket and welcoming you to the coach bubble of dressed-up customers searching for their seat. Michael really enjoys this pleasure of travelling. Juliet is not happy with him being away from home so often, but she exaggerates. He is not travelling that much and not far either. Only to European cities, not across oceans like his colleague Sam, the old show off. Terrible guy. Bigmouth strikes again. Oh, how nice that would be to listen to that old Smiths song, Michael thinks. He has forgotten his headphones though.

The train starts the journey. Announcements in four languages and the food cart passing soon. He closes his eyes, his bag between his feet keeping the two small wine bottles from clinking. He would have bought big ones, but big bottles have corks and they get messy, once opened. The Indian looking woman sitting beside him is writing something into a pink notebook. Everything about her seems to be pink: Her shoes, her lipstick, her blouse. She pads her writing with a handkerchief as if she wants to dry the ink. Then the food arrives.

„Where are you going, Sir?“, the conductor with the cart asks.

„Amsterdam!“ Michael says with a confident voice. He has been there often.

„Would you care for a lunch?“ the conductor asks. His eyes are light grey and hazy. „We have either couscous with vegetables or cold fish.“

Michael takes the couscous. Always nicer to drink with warm food, he thinks. The Indian woman takes the fish. She seems happy to get some food. „Fish, fish“, she says.

Outside, the dark clouds build the backdrop for the approaching Netherlands.

“What can I get you to drink? I have...”

“Red wine”, Michael interrupts. The Indian woman looks at him with only a very slight move of her head. The conductor pours the glass half full and turns to her. “And you, Mam?” “Water, please and tomato juice”, she replies.

The couscous tastes boring and the glass of wine is almost empty

after the first sip. Michael feels a wave of bad mood foaming through him. But then his feet touch the bottles in the bag and even the clouds outside seem to have a bright side. Another big advantage of Gare du Midi, he thinks, you can buy bottles with screw top.

The Indian woman is stripping the yoghurt sauce from the cold fish. She tries to pile up the glibbery remains on her knife to one of the corners of her tray. She does not want the fish to ever be touched again by the yoghurt, it seems. The fish is now not only cold, but also naked. Michael feels irritation coming back.

“Good food?!” he tells her, half inquiring, half imposing. He considers it polite enough. He frankly does not care what she thinks about him.

“Yes, good.” She answers.

“You don’t like yoghurt?”, he insists.

“Not too much”, she smiles and adds: “Not milk too much.”

“Well, then you came to the wrong country”, Michael says and realizes how wrong it sounds.

“I don’t mean to say anything offensive,” he tries to get out. “Just that there is a lot of milk in the Netherlands. Cheese, you know? Or actually we are still in Flanders, but soon we will be in Holland. One mentality. One region. You know European history? You know the history of this region?” The Asian woman is silent. Does not move anymore. “Maybe you would like to share something that does not contain milk.” And as if realizing that this invitation too sounded a little inappropriate, Michael spouts his hand into

the bag, grabs the bottleneck and with the tight grip of two fingers unscrews the cap. The cracking sound of the seal seems to transform the world around him. Something suddenly feels different. So different that he can't help giggling. He feels tipsy with anticipation. Then he looks to the Indian woman and jumps in his seat. She is gone and instead a jester has taken her seat. His face is familiar, his eyes are grey. The cloths he wears are so colourful they hurt like sunlight. His nose is pointy and he is rubbing his hands.

"You enjoy the drink alright", the jester giggles, no the master of giggles in this game. Michael's face feels empty. The train seems to vanish around him, as if it was slowly filled up with milk.

"You enjoy the drink alright often," the jester continues. The bells on his cap jingle.

"You enjoy the drink alright often and are content." He takes Michael's hand into his long bony fingers and leads him into the milky haze. The train is completely gone. Everything is of inscrutable white.

"You enjoy the drink often and are not content." The ground below them is hard and wooden, not the soft carpet anymore. Michael cannot see the jester now, just hear the bells and feel the grip of his hand. His eyes are getting used to the milky air around him. He can see a light coming from above, a strong light. And then another one. And another one. Juliet is standing beside him dressed in a sparkling garment like a princess, a band of pearls around her hair, her face white with powder. She speaks slowly: "I am tired of this, Michael. Tired of this play."

He wants to reach out and hold her hand, but he doesn't. Something is holding him back. The bells have stopped.

Juliet opens her mouth to say: "Let's put and end to it." But before she does, a heavy curtain lifts with a sudden jolt and the sound of roaring applause fills the room.

Michael startles in his seat and looks to the right. The Indian woman is eating her cappuccino-coloured dessert and smiling. He slowly screws the cap back on the bottle. He would wait a little with the next drink.

I I I

*For sound prologue click [here](#)*

**M**ichael couldn't wait for the hostess to clear his tray before searching for something to read in his complimentary copy of *FT*, in a nervous attempt to distract himself from his disturbing vision of *Juliet and the jester*, and suppress the yearning he felt for another quiet quaff of wine.

By now the train, which had sped its way through the flat fields of Holland, was coming into Rotterdam station and yet his Asian neighbour was still scribbling in her ridiculous pink notebook.

"Even her scrawny fingernails are pink", thought Michael uncharitably, as he put his hand down into the bag once more.

"I don't like to see a young man like you turning to drink", said the Asian lady, catching Michael this time by surprise. Despite the annoyance he felt, more than once in the past Michael had needed to brush off this sort of moralist remark from strangers. He had a retort already prepared.

"Turning to drink? Why I'm only trying to save a few euros. You know the prices they charge on these trains!" he said, hoping his courteous reply would let her know he had no intention of keeping up the conversation.

"But it's not good for you, at any price, to drink like that" continued the lady, turning her face directly towards him, her red-pink bindi drawing Michael's eyes to hers.

"No, no, no, it's just I like to have a little tipple from time to time" Michael said in a modest, self-effacing tone, thinking surely this

witch had lived long enough in Europe to know there's absolutely nothing the matter with a drop every now and again.

"On such a path, a man's life will end badly" she responded.

By now Michael was starting to find the woman harder to handle. "Well I don't think it's any of your business" he spluttered, taken aback by her intrusiveness.

"I have seen many, many times in my life where drink leads a man," she insisted, nodding her head from side to side to the rhythm of her words.

"Well I'm very sorry, Madam", uttered Michael, his tone rising in defiance, "I simply cannot agree with you there."

The lady was not prepared to hold back her opinion. "I speak the truth: drink will bring you down, down on your knees my son" she added.

If that's what she wanted, Michael was happy for a quarrel with this Hari-Krishna look-alike, but she got in first.

"I know" she said, her change in tone interrupting and soothing Michael's growing stream of angry thoughts, "that a good man like you has reasons to stumble on the way. Circumstances can be hard. Circumstances can bring you to want to deceive the ones around you, the ones whom you love."

Michael flushed. By now the woman beside him had taken on some sort of aura, the pinkness that had first struck him now softened. Calmer pastel colours had come into play, spiralling in a living stream around her, while on her forehead appeared a luminous disc in a peach-violet hue, which eased Michael's growing anxiety with the conversation. He began to hear the jingling sound once again, only this time more gently.

"You must stop drinking alcohol, Michael." she whispered in a firm tone "for the sake of Juliet and Ophelia."

"How does she know our names?" reflected Michael, as his body weakened and his anger ebbed further away from his chest. "No, no" he muttered, losing the strength to combat her, wanting to tell her, directly "You're a liar" but without the force to speak.

"Michael, seven times I have asked you to listen to me. Now, pay attention to what I say. Listen, very very carefully" she murmured. "You may save yourself but you must freely you wish to do so. You must turn back to your wife and your daughter. If you three go together, you will find the answer you seek". She paused. "Look to the 'if Michael, and you will be healed."

Michael woke as the train decelerated on its arrival into Amsterdam. Still in a state of some consternation, he called the hostess and asked her what had happened to the peculiar Indian lady who had been sitting beside him.

"Oh, sir, she got down at the last stop, at Schiphol" the young girl replied, with a broad smile. "She said she had a flight to catch to Mumbai. She went very happily" she added. "What is the name of those little Indian cymbals? She jingled them all the way down the train, laughing as she left. It was wonderful. Didn't you hear her?"

Michael was relieved that his business affairs in Amsterdam had been sufficiently demanding of his energies that afternoon to mean he hadn't had time to dwell on the disturbing dream with Juliet and the jester. And then there had been that run-in with that moralistic Indian clown-of-a-woman. The train ride on the way back, however, was another story. The bottles he had

smuggled in once more in his bag and sipped from all journey had had no settling effect at all on his anxious state of mind. Instead, Juliet's words had rambled on and on in his mind.

"What does she mean, tired of this play?" he thought again and again. "What does she want to put an end to?" he asked himself, incapable of finding an answer.

As Michael opened the door to his *bel-étage rénové* in Anderlecht Juliet was immediately upon him, giving him the warmest welcome he felt he'd had in years. "I'm so glad you're home, Michael" she said, her eyes glistening with sentiment.

Michael knew how well he could hide his secret from Juliet. Always having a packet of mints on him was handy in emergencies. But he'd always been able to take his drink and, as his years with Juliet passed, he had noticed that if she showed the slightest suspicion he had been drinking, it was enough for him just to refer to how busy he'd been in the office or how impossible Maurice, his boss, had been that day and he could comfort himself that she was "Off the scent again." Now, seeing her in front of him upset, he knew he had to say something kind.

"Are you OK, darling? Have you been thinking about your father?" he asked with a caring upturn in his voice.

"No. Well, yes, sort of," she stuttered. "In fact, I've gone and done something rather unusual" she continued. "I was remembering his passion for the theatre and, well...." She paused, anticipating Michael's surprise at what she was going to say "...you'll never believe it, I've gone and bought the best seats in the house for you, me and Ophelia, to see the RSC production of Othello at Théâtre National on Friday."

Michael was eased to find out that Juliet's emotional greeting had a logical explanation, meaning that this time she'd never notice he may have had one too many for his own good.

"Tickets to the theatre? For us, the three of us?" he asked in order to turn the conversation back on her. "All these years we've been together and when was the last time we all saw a play?"

"I thought it would do us some good. It's one of my favourite Shakespeare plays," she said firmly.

Michael was thrown a little by the unexpected nature of Juliet's proposal. "Where the hell was she getting the money for theatre tickets?", he thought.

But he quickly decided to change tack in the conversation. "That's funny" he replied, "I had a dream today, about you and me." He felt ready to press on and tell her about his encounter. After all, they had a very open relationship. The only thing he knew he couldn't, and wouldn't tell her about was the Indian lady, nor the drink.

"We were on the stage together, taking the applause, with the stage lights shining bright in our eyes," he recounted "you were dressed as a princess and there was some sort of joker figure who had been teasing me."

Juliet looked suddenly quite enchanted by Michael's departure into fantasy and came straight back, "What did the jester mock you about? Your mid-rift bulge or your thinning hatch?"

"About my life, actually" said Michael moving into a state of sober recollection of the scene "what I'm doing with my life and where it's..."

"The jester didn't start going on about "All the world's a stage, did he?" interrupted Juliet.

“In a, in a way” answered Michael, hesitating.

“Then it must have been ‘As you like it’” exclaimed Juliet, unable to repress the excitement Michael knew she had felt as a little girl when her father took her to the theatre. “It ends where Rosalind, the heroine of the piece, marries her faithful Orlando....”, she described eagerly. Michael was smiling flatly at her, as she added “...and it all ends happily ever after”.

Inside Michael felt a cold wave of self-consciousness. Unable to control the memories from his agitated day, he realised he had already imagined quite a different conclusion to the story.

# IV

*For sound prologue click [here](#)*

**J**uliet felt Michael's silent hesitation.

"But maybe you dreamt it another way?" she laughed wearily.

- "Well I... No, of course not, the whole thing was quite confusing I told you; there was this Jester and..."
- "Yes, but how does it end?" she asked him, this time more insistently.
- "Well there was no end to it. We went on I guess; just like in real life..." he said, contemplating his right shoe as though it was the most intriguing item in the room.
- "Just like in real life..." Juliet repeated slowly.

A muffled sound started behind him. They both turned to it at once. Michael's phone was ringing in his briefcase.

- "Let it ring" he said, "I'll call back whoever it is later".
- "It might be Ophelia, she said she'd call to tell us when to pick her up". She moved past him, heading for the briefcase on the table.

Michael panicked; he had left some empty bottles of wine in his briefcase. There were no bins to be seen when he arrived at the Gare du Midi earlier this evening. They seemed to have all been taken away for security reasons following the recent attacks in Brussels. With police officers patrolling everywhere, he didn't want to be verbalised for dumping trash in some dark corner of the train station. What would Juliet think if she found them? They were maybe only 25cl each but there were three of them. How would he explain?

He blocked her with his arm, pushing her away firmly.

- “*Let it ring I said*” he repeated nervously.
- She looked at him in dismay “*Why? Who’s calling you?*”
- “*Nobody, errh... I don’t know. Listen it’s not important. You were telling me about these theatre tickets. When are we going?*” he tried lightly.
- “*Don’t think you’ll get off the hook that easy! I want to know who called you! With this attitude, you’re making me think it could be another woman*” she said in a tight laugh.
- “*You are one to talk!*”
- “*What do you mean?*”
- “*I never got the final version about whatever was going on with that sly brother of mine and you 7 years ago.*”
- She sighed heavily. “*Oh no, not that again. We’ve been through this a thousands times. Miles was there for me when you were not. You were on one business trip after the next at the time, felt almost like you were running away from the whole situation...*”
- “*Mmmmmh*”
- “*You left me alone when my father had just died for Christ’s sake. Thank God Miles was there. If it wasn’t for him, I would have gone mad with grief.*”
- “*Yes, yes... you’ve said it before. It was my entire fault. But I’ll never be a hundred percent sure of what really went on between the both of you. Anyway it has always been like that with him, always living in my shadow... A scavenger I’ll tell you.*”

As he was speaking, he gently motioned Juliet away from the briefcase and the table.

- “Miles has never been a scavenger. He was just there for me when...” Her voice broke as she burst into tears, ravaged by sadness at the thought of her father’s death. “He was there for me when...when I wasn’t even able to be there for my own father...”.

Juliet was now sobbing heavily. Why was she reacting so strongly? They’d had this argument about his brother numerous times. She’d always dismissed it as though it was nothing. Why was she now overreacting like this?

- “What’s wrong with you?” he asked blankly.

She took a long breath and managed to pull herself together. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I had the strangest dream last night. I was Miss Juliet all over again... He loved theatre so much you know”.

- “Are you trying to tell me all this is about your father?”
- “Who else would it be about Michael?” she said angrily as she was going through her pockets, trying to find her handkerchief to dry her tears.
- “Well it does feels strange that you started bursting into tears as soon as we got to the Miles topic, no?”
- “Oh no not that again please!” she said frantically.

She looked at him in disbelief as she kept on going methodically through her pockets, slowly realising that she couldn’t find it. Her precious handkerchief... Michael had given it to her a long time ago, on their first summer pic Nic. The weather was hot and he

had given it to her to wipe her brow. She'd always kept it on her since, a token of his affection. She was sure she had it with her this afternoon at her mother's. Maybe she'd dropped it there during the move? She didn't want him to notice so she eventually turned around and grabbed some kitchen paper.

- "I'm tired Michael..."
- "Tired of this play?" he asked cynically.

A light jingle rang behind him. He first thought of his phone but, as he turned around, the jester was standing right behind him with a large smile.

- "You enjoy the drink often and are not content," he giggled.

The jester came closer. "It's all a question of perspective. What you need, what you don't. It's all a question of perspective, what end of the bottle you look into". Michael shook his head and looked again. The jingle started once more, but this time it was the Indian lady standing in front of him. "I don't like yogurt you know" she said. "But sometimes you have to adapt. You can't live in your own reality. And running away is not the answer". She pushed passed him, walking straight up to Juliet who was still turning her back to them, sobbing silently. "When you run away, you always leave a trail behind. People who run away actually want to be found. Don't you know this? Running away is actually running towards. But from another angle" she laughed.

Juliet stood perfectly still. As she removed the kitchen paper from her eyes, she realised that the silver shapes, the same that had come to her last night, were all around her. Some were whispering, others just watched her silently. The bearded one who had already spoken to her came forward. "You are guilty of your

own pain Miss Juliet". "People often are" another voice uttered. She couldn't believe her eyes. Could Michael see them? They kept on. "We are all part of your father's heart, we are what he loved. And so are you. Keep your promise but don't lose yourself in the guilt Miss Juliet". Another shape slipped passed her, whispering: "we can only do as good as we're able." He kept on: "sometimes we miss opportunities Miss Juliet, we shouldn't stay locked in them forever though". A smaller entity slipped its vaporous hand into hers "Never block the flow Miss Juliet. Forgiveness is all it takes." And just like that, they were gone.

She turned around to see if Michael had seen any of it. He stood there, just as stunned as her. They both started at once "did you see...?". "No" they both answered in chorus.

Looking into Juliet's reddened eyes, Michael felt a rush of sadness and helplessness. "Why do we always believe the worst in the ones we love?" he questioned, more to himself than to Juliet.

"Why do we always believe the worst in ourselves?" Juliet added in a whisper.

- "I fear most things are irreversible," Michael added.
- "I cannot accept that idea. As long as we are alive, we have free will over most of the things that happen to us. Blaming it on faith is the easy way out. We are responsible for our actions...and for the lack of them too."
- "I don't believe this. We are burdened by life, at every stage, at every age. Each step comes with its share of problems and difficulties. Too much for one's frail shoulders. A lone walker on a sea dike on a stormy night. We bury our heads in our coats, trying to shield ourselves from the elements, trying not to be taken by the roaring sea that moves by our side."

- “These are only excuses Michael, one must take responsibility for his actions.”
- “Well whatever responsibility I am willing to take, it won’t change the fact that we are all embarked on the same journey. Some have better tickets than others, but the train is going to the same destination for everyone. No matter how far you run, you always come back to the same point. The very same spot. It’s a cruel joke really. Seven steps and then you fall!”

Michael looked longingly at the fridge...he could definitely use a glass of chilled chardonnay just about now.

- “Should we have a drink before supper” he asked as nonchalantly as possible.
- “No, I don’t want a drink. I want to know if Ophelia’s alright.”

Michael froze as she brushed passed him, ignoring his briefcase and heading straight out of the kitchen. After a few seconds he heard her voice coming from the reading room “Sweetheart, did you try calling Daddy? I can come and pick you up now if you want.”

“I’ve gotten away with it again,” he thought triumphantly. Feeling every muscle relax in his body, he grabbed the bottle of wine from the fridge and poured himself a full glass. A few sips later, the magic was already doing its work.

In the reading room, Juliet sat in her armchair staring at the phone. Ophelia wanted to stay another night at her friend so there was nothing more she could do for her this evening. She looked up at her father’s books and heard a soft whisper, as if a

breeze was gently blowing over them. She immediately felt an anguished clench inside her chest. What did she have to show for all these years with her father? Why didn't she make the most of them at the time? The sounds started again. "*Am I going mad?*" she asked herself silently.

In the kitchen, Michael had just poured himself a third glass of chardonnay. Things were looking much brighter than they had a few minutes ago. He was glad. The little bottles of wine were now safely in the glass bin, under the sink. How could she ever understand? He was at war, he needed every little help he could get.

In the reading room Juliet looked distractedly through the window that gave on to the back garden. On the small coffee table by the reading light, a copy of Shakespeare's "*As You Like It*" rested, opened. If Juliet had listened carefully she maybe would have heard another voice whispering wisely. "*All the world's a stage,*" it said. "*This is only a play, only a story. You can choose any time to stop believing in it.*"

\*\*\*\*\*