

Mercutio

*"I am glad of it; for now I shall have reason
To show the love and duty that I bear you
With franker spirit: therefore, as I am bound,
Receive it from me. I speak not yet of proof.
Look to your wife; observe her well with Cassio;
Wear your eye thus, not jealous nor secure:
I would not have your free and noble nature,
Out of self-bounty, be abused; look to't:

I know our country disposition well;
In Venice they do let heaven see the pranks
They dare not show their husbands; their best conscience
Is not to leave't undone, but keep't unknown."*

I close my old, dog-eared copy of *Othello*, and walk out into the street, heading home via the piazza. Reeling slightly from the heat of the Italian sun, I slide on my shades, light a cigarette, and take a long and grateful drag. It's been three months since my drama group started the Shakespearean tragedy, and I'm still not any closer to de-coding my character, Iago. Machiavellian villain or mere victim of hurt pride? Malignancy or opportunism? Age-old and diametrically opposed, these questions just seem to perpetuate inside my already throbbing head.

Because what's taking up the most space up there is Romeo. God, I love him. *Have* loved him for as long as I can remember.

It was easier when we were young, all I had to do was tag along through all his boyish phases. Now that we've grown up, all manner of *feelings* have gone and got themselves involved. It's got to the point that I'm happy when he's happy, sad when he's sad, ticked off when he's completely irate.

But it's all wrong because it my straighter than straight best friend is in love with my sister. My flesh and blood. My sister, who has got him dining out of the palm of her hand- one look into her sultry brown eyes, and he's fish food.

It's funny how Shakespeare always wrote these great soppy sonnets about love and never once wrote any thing about loathing. I could think of a few odes for my sibling: "How do I hate thee? Let me count the ways" and "Shall I compare thee to a crappy day?" All that 'love thy neighbour' jargon - no one ever said it was imperative to 'love thy sister' now, did they?

The sunlight is blinding and my hair flops heavily over my forehead. As if by fate, I spot my sister through the heat haze, plain as day, kissing a guy that isn't Romeo.

I drink from the vodka bottle with eager aplomb, desperate to numb all feeling. How *could* she?

"And I thought it was *me* that had the problems." Romeo says, letting out a cheeky, quiet laugh. If only he knew. My best friend who is coincidentally the love of my life, is being cheated on by my cold and calculated sister, the resident *Lady Macbeth*. Christ, when did my life spiral into this cheap, lacklustre soap opera?

"Yeah well you're not the only one." Wincing slightly at the burn of the alcohol, it's all I can do to attempt a weak smile.

"So tell me what's bothering you Merc." He asks with what appears to be real concern, and I'm thrown off completely. Should I tell him the truth about what I saw? Or should I keep his feelings from harm's way? The dilemma is unbearable, and I'm beyond bewildered when Romeo explodes with laughter. I watch him warily, taking in his fair hair and sapphire-blue eyes in the process.

"It's your face!... You look hilarious man!" He exclaims, wiping the jovial tears from his eyes.

Maybe it's the burning passion.

Or maybe it's the vodka.

Although, it could well be the passion.

Or then again it could just be the vodka.

Whatever it is, I lunge forward, seize Romeo's face into my hands, and kiss him. Time moves lethargically, Dali-esque. I'm relishing the moment until Romeo roughly jerks away.

"What the hell are you playing at?" he yells, leaping off of the couch as if I were the town's leper. Oh dear God- what did I just *do*?

"You just kissed me! What is wrong with..." His sentence drifts off, seemingly lost forever. Confusion makes the effortless transition to full-blown awareness.

"Oh my god. You *kissed* me. You mean you...you're...?" I nod timidly, the embarrassment devouring me, swallowing me, whole.

Silence. He paces up and down, his hurried footsteps in sync with my heartbeat.

"But...I'm with Rosaline. Your *sister*, Mercutio. Rosaline. I love her." he attempts to reason, anguished, making less sense than the whole situation itself. And then: "I'm going to ask her to marry me."

No, that can't be right. "You...can't" I barely croak.

More silence. More pacing. And then he lets out a shrill laugh. It's not the laugh that I've come to know and love. It's cruel. Mocking. Chilling.

"How could you've expected me to...I mean, I'm not even a *fag*" he scoffs.

The word sets my skin ablaze and my eyes prick with the hot tears of hurt-but it's much more than anger.

"Look to your wife; observe her well with Cassio"

Of course, it all makes sense now. How could I have not seen it? Iago wasn't made to be the villain. No. It's just that honesty was made a bitter pill for the disillusioned to swallow.

"She doesn't love *you*." I almost spit the words.

A furious snarl generates from deep within him, and suddenly my best friend is lunging forward, grabbing my collar with a balled-up fist in mid-air, and ramming me heavily into the glass cabinet. The glasses crash against each other with an ear-splitting clamour, and we stand facing each other, chests heaving with adrenaline.

"Go on! HIT ME!" I urge him, thunderous. "I am what I am after all, *right?*" I'm shaking, seething, but seep my words in sarcasm all the same. "Your words don't change a thing Romeo."

At this, his whole demeanour crumbles. First, the clenched fist drops lifelessly to his side. Then his grip on my collar loosens. It takes me a while to look at him, but when I do, I almost instantly wish I hadn't.

His cheeks are drained completely- devoid of colour and reduced to a pallid, ashen shade. His face is drawn, distraught, like a man condemned to hell for eternity; instead, a real life *Faustus* stands before me, not Romeo. His stunning, once azure eyes are replaced by sullen cobalt ones, his lids droop heavily with melancholic resignation. He moves as if in slow motion towards the front door, opens it and disappears, leaving me alone in the room.

“Look to your wife, observe her well with Cassio” I whisper to myself, trembling at the gravity of it all. The denouement. “Because she isn’t all that she seems.”