



In fair Verona, where we lay our scene

Dear Juliet,

I am no longer young, but there was a time, yes, there was a time when I believed in love. I can sound out the names of lovers and draw up their faces, each one, so clearly. And then they are gone. Why is it that love comes so easily for some but refuses to stay for others? Why should it be so? Why should it twist our souls so grievously?

I read the letter all the way through. It looked like the others in the pile, nothing terribly special about it. These letters are all handwritten—matters so close to the heart cannot be typed—then they are folded into hopeful envelopes and mailed to Juliet, care of Verona.

Giovanna appeared at my door. “Ciao,” she said. “Would you care for a coffee?”

“No, I . . . I’m okay.”

Giovanna wore pearls even in the afternoon. She swept into the room, glanced at the letter in front of me, and read my thoughts. “Some are quite moving, are they not?”

“I’m not sure how to answer this one.”

“Ah,” she said, scraping a wooden chair in to sit beside me. She bent over the letter, tipping her reading glasses slightly. “Many of the letters are full of sadness. They are poetry too sometimes.”

“So how should I answer?”

She peered at me. “Sometimes it is enough for them just to write.”

“This woman writes so beautifully. I’m not sure I—”

“The answer,” she went on, patting the letter, “is often contained in their words.”

“But—”

“You must be like a fortune-teller. You must watch for signs. The writer will tell you what they want to hear.”

“I don’t know.”

Giovanna looked at me as if I were slow. “She needs to know that her life is good, that she is worthy, that she is important. She needs to know that. That’s what you must write.”

“And then I sign it ‘Juliet’?”

“If you wish. Or you can sign ‘Juliet’s secretary.’”

“Okay.”

Giovanna stood and straightened her dress. “We take this responsibility very seriously.” She turned on her heels and walked to the doorway, where she hovered, a slender hand on the doorframe.

“Yes, of course,” I said.

“No coffee then?” She fixed me with a final stare.

“No, thanks. I’ll just get to work.”

“*Va bene.*” She lingered, watching, then brushed out of the room.

There is no Juliet, of course, though the tourist board of Verona would certainly like you to believe there is. Verona is an ancient city. Around it lie the fields of Valpolicella, valley of the cellars, some of the oldest vineyards in the world. Julius Caesar spent his summers here. Dante came in exile to finish his *Divine Comedy*. But nothing is as singular to the city as the legend of Romeo and Juliet.

When I first crossed into the old town, I passed through a gate in the towering medieval walls. On a bronze plaque there, bolted to the stones, were the words THERE IS NO WORLD WITHOUT VERONA WALLS, BUT PURGATORY, TORTURE, HELL ITSELF.

That was Romeo's line. He didn't exist either, at least not exactly.

Plaques like these are all over Verona, marking the major events in Shakespeare's play—a story that was not written here, a story that was made famous centuries before, in a different language and a different country.

I arrived in Verona at the end of July, two years ago, with a pocketful of questions. I was here to learn something. Something about love and maybe something about Shakespeare. Already I could see the crowds ahead of me, bunching and yammering, cameras at the ready, and I knew exactly where they were headed. The throngs funneled past gleaming shopwindows, past the cashmere sweaters and five-hundred-dollar shoes on display, and I was swept along with them. The street opened into a square on our left, but the crowd veered right and then, suddenly, there was an arch and a passageway before us and a sign that read CASA DI GIULIETTA—the House of Juliet. Here we were at last. We grew silent and reverent. I'll admit I was cynical. Many of the younger women were enraptured, dragging along boyfriends desperately feigning interest. "It's not real!" I wanted to call out. "It's just a story!"

We shuffled under a stone archway and emerged into a courtyard. And there it was: the famous balcony. It jutted from the wall, ten feet above us. Vines, perfect for climbing, tangled

up the old stones. It was a little too perfect. The balcony itself is actually an ancient Roman sarcophagus. It was incorporated into the wall in 1937 to lure gullible tourists like us. You can go inside the house too—it's a sort of museum—and various young lovers come out on the balcony to get their photographs taken. Below, crowds cheer when they kiss. Cameras click. Texts are sent.

By the steps to the entrance, a placard tells the history of the house. I squeezed through the crowd to get close enough to read it: THIS HOUSE, it said, HAS BEEN IN THE POSSESSION OF ONE FAMILY SINCE THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY. Above the arch is their emblem, the insignia of the Cappello family—a rounded hat like a bowler, as the Cappellos were, apparently, hatmakers.

Now, that surprised me. The Capulet name was obviously derived from Cappello. How would Shakespeare have known that? I looked around. Had he been here? There are lost years in his life—years when he may have been traveling overseas, but it's not generally believed that he ever made it to Verona. The answer is simpler, as most answers are. Shakespeare almost certainly adapted *Romeo and Juliet* from an earlier work, and that work—an epic poem—had in turn been adapted from an Italian story dating back to around 1530.

This old courtyard, then, has been a place of pilgrimage for at least two hundred years. Charles Dickens came to see it and write about it. He didn't like it much. The house had degenerated at that time into a miserable little inn with a brutish dog at the door and geese waddling across the courtyard. Now it flapped with tourists. Dickens probably wouldn't have liked that either. In one corner stands a bronze statue of Juliet, her eyes cast downward, demure, her long fingers self-consciously clasping the folds of her diaphanous gown.

For reasons I don't completely understand, you are supposed to gently cup your hand over her right breast and make your wish to the gods of love. One by one, the pilgrims step up to fondle

her breast. The bronze there is polished to a golden sheen. Her face, meanwhile, is darkened with a charcoal patina.

For some time, I watched the crowds, until I noticed an elderly woman strolling the yard in contemplation. She moved from one feature to another, lingering at each, reading the placards, standing before the statue and then, just before leaving, she hesitated. She turned to take in the balcony one last time, then nodded before disappearing under the stones of the archway. And where the woman had been standing, a bright red wooden letter box appeared. I hadn't noticed it until that moment. It was hand-tooled, intricate in its carpentry, painted crimson, and mounted on the brick wall by the entrance to the house. I edged over to it. POSTA DI GIULIETTA, it read. Letters to Juliet.



When letters to Juliet started arriving in Verona in 1937, no one knew what to do with them. They were propped up against the gravestones at the Monastery of San Francesco, long said to be the home of Juliet's vault, and the groundskeeper there took it upon himself to answer them. By the '50s, a poet had taken over the task, and by 1989, a baker named Giulio Tamassia had stepped in to answer the steady flow of letters. Giulio eventually retired from the confectionery business and opened up the first official office for the letters to Juliet. Hundreds of them were pouring in to Verona by this point, and Giulio set himself to the task of answering—for the next twenty-five years.

Giovanna, Giulio Tamassia's daughter, took over the operations from her father and now manages the Club di Giulietta, whose staff sort the letters into languages, answer them, and then catalogue the originals. Giovanna complains that the city is not paying them enough to cover their postage, that they don't help with the rent on the office, but still the letters flood in, overflowing boxes and spilling off counters.

I'd e-mailed Giovanna months before to ask if I could come to Verona and volunteer to answer letters to Juliet. Of course, my motives went deeper. I had a situation of my own that I was trying to figure out, but that's not what I told Giovanna. I was a writer, I said. I'd been a teacher for a long time. I'd taught *Romeo and Juliet* and maybe I could help with the letters—the English letters, at least.

The day I arrived, she picked me up at my hotel—barely an hour after I'd clumped up from the train station. She parked nearby and strode up the sidewalk to where I was waiting.

“You are Glenn Dixon?”

“Giovanna?”

“Yes. Come, I am on my way to the office now.”

She didn't say much. I wondered if she had seen this all before—if it was quite common for foreign volunteers to show up, earnest and eager, but maybe not up to the task. I wondered if this was all really a bit of a bother to her.

“Here is the Roman arena,” she said at one point, breaking the silence, looking out the windshield at the wide piazza in front of us.

“Okay,” I said, but I was too new to the city to know what she was talking about. I sat rigid in the passenger seat and we turned right, under medieval battlements the color of burnt umber. We crossed a bridge, the Ponte Nuovo, skirted a cemetery, and then wound down into an industrial area of offices and warehouses. At number 3, Via Galileo Galilei, we pulled in. A blue bicycle was tipped against the wall and the front door was propped open. Inside, it looked just like any other office reception room, with a potted plant and a front counter that faced the door.

Giovanna waved me in and pointed to a chair at a round table just in front of the counter. She sat down beside me and began to talk. First, she spoke about her father—he's still alive—and I asked her a bit more about the history of the place.

“It is a long story,” she said, glancing back at the counter and the piles of paperwork there.

“But it all happens here. All the letters are answered here?” I pressed.

“Yes, of course. We are very busy.”

The place was in a state of organized frenzy. Opera posters and framed photographs obscured the walls. Books and papers lined the counters, tall and squared, like military squadrons ready to tumble. “So,” I said, “how many letters do you get a month?”

“Come,” she said, rising abruptly. I trailed her down a corridor to a smaller office at the back. *Office* is a euphemism. It was more like a warehouse. Shelves ran along two of the walls, sagging under the weight of a dozen or so cardboard boxes. All of the boxes brimmed with letters, and each was labeled according to language: Russian, Chinese, Swedish, French. Along the third wall was a counter with chairs pulled up to it as a sort of makeshift desk. An English box had already been placed there. Someone had set up a little workstation for me with a stack of stationery and envelopes. They’d even laid a pen out, just so, parallel to the papers.

“It will take some time for you to read them all,” Giovanna said, pointing at the box. There were several hundred letters in just this one box. Maybe even a thousand. My smile faded.

I scooped up a handful of letters. Many were in pale violet or thick, creamy envelopes, as if they were wedding invitations. But there were also loose scraps of paper, letters hastily written and, I imagined, dumped at the last minute into the letter box at Juliet’s house. I picked up one that was simply scrawled on the back of a train ticket. The return address: Brazil. I dropped it back into the box.

“Would you like to begin now?” Giovanna asked. “You can sit here.”

I did as I was told. It was going to be a long afternoon.

“Write your answers on these,” she said, tapping the stack of four-by-six sheets she’d left for me. “Then tuck them into the envelopes—but do not seal them.”

I looked at the return envelopes. They were printed with a graphic of Juliet on the balcony. Her hair was whipping in the wind, her hand outstretched imploringly. She looked more like a pinup girl from the 1950s than anything from Shakespeare.

“I will be out front if you have any questions.” She eyed me for a moment, then swept out of the office more quickly than I would have liked. I thought there’d be a little more in-service, maybe some training. I wasn’t sure I was ready.

I heaved the English box a little closer and the letters within shifted like sand. A few slid onto the counter and I reached for the nearest one. The letter was from the United States—California. I opened the envelope and began to read: “George left us on April 7, 2014. He and I were married for twenty-five years.”

Ah. A tragic tale of loss. But then I kept reading.

“I have recently met again with an old love of mine, Harry. Is it too soon? Is it too soon to feel these feelings again?”

What could I say to that? I didn’t even know Harry.

I pushed back my chair, ready to call Giovanna, but thought better of it. How could I admit defeat on the first letter? I read the letter all the way to the end, paused, then picked up a pen and paper.

“Dear Jane,” I wrote. “You will find the answer in your heart.”

I looked down at my page. What a load of bunk. I balled up the sheet and began again. I wrote another trite cliché, reread it, then crumpled up that answer too. I dropped Jane’s letter back into the box.

Maybe that was just a hard one. I needed to start off easier, something that wasn’t so complicated. I plucked another from the pile.

Dear Juliet,

I have been excepted [sic] into a university far away from where I live. It's a very good university and a very good opportunity for me. The only thing is, I have just met a guy. He lives here. Please, what should I do?

Ha, I thought, I can answer that. I thanked her for her letter, then urged her to go on to university. I told her that the guy would wait for her—if he was worth anything at all. Then I added Polonius's line from *Hamlet*: "To thine own self be true." I thought that sounded good. I put my reply in an envelope and picked up the next letter.

"Dear Juliet," it read. "I am sixteen years old. I have waited for so long to meet my Romeo. When will he appear?" *Oh, honey. You're sixteen. You have a whole world of pain ahead of you. Don't worry.* I didn't write that. Instead, I wrote that she should be patient. That she should go and do the things she loved to do and that she might then find her love engaged in similar pursuits—and wouldn't that be perfect?

Letter by letter, response by response, I fell into a rhythm. Each answer was two or three paragraphs long. I made sure to offer lots of reassurance that love would come, even if it had been lost. I used the "To thine own self be true" line embarrassingly often. As I wrote, I imagined writing letters to my younger self. It helped me with the answers, though truthfully, most of the time I felt like a high school guidance counselor, doling out advice that was likely irrelevant.

For the rest of the morning, I answered letters—thirty maybe—and read many more. The letters were mostly from the UK, the US, and my home, Canada. I answered letters from as far away as China, India, Mexico, and Poland. Sometimes the English was broken and simple, but the sentiments were all the same. All

of them were asking about love. All were asking about this soul-wrenching experience that is both our deepest sorrow and our greatest joy.

I'd had my own problems in love. And part of the reason I had come to Verona was to learn something more about this all-encompassing force in our lives. To learn something, anything, that would help me understand my own heartbreak and help me, maybe, trust in love once more.

Until relatively recently, romantic love was thought to be a cultural construct. The idea of romantic love arose, allegedly, in the early Middle Ages, probably in France. It came to us through the etiquettes of courtly love, immortalized in the songs of troubadours and in the mores of chivalry.

Of course, that's not quite right. Love has been around for much longer than we can imagine. And it's not particular to any one culture. Everyone everywhere experiences love. No one had to invent it. In a recent study across fifteen thousand people in forty-eight countries, romantic love appeared in every culture. It's now believed to be among two hundred universally human traits—like the ability to use language to communicate, or to create and enjoy music, or the presence of laughter. Scientists actually keep track of this sort of thing. The ability to love, it seems, is central to being human.

We all feel attraction to others, something that goes beyond sexual desire. In one study, five-year-olds reported being in love just as frequently as eighteen-year-olds, and it wasn't their teddy bears they were talking about. The children had all the symptoms of adults—butterflies in the stomach, a helpless yearning, and an overwhelming need to be noticed by the object of their affections.

I certainly remember my first love. When Shannon Mahoney appeared at the door to Mrs. Acton's grade-seven math class, I was

completely smitten. I don't know why. I just remember that it was instantaneous. She was thirteen, I was twelve, and for the next two years I was madly in love with her—though I don't think I ever said more than, "Could you please pass the pencil crayons?" to this earthly angel. I dreamed up all sorts of fantasies about her, mostly elaborate escapades where I'd rescue her from distress, scenarios that usually involved water, because I was a really good swimmer.

And then one day, my feelings suddenly faded away.

Why any of this should be is not well understood. Why is it that I fell for that one girl in particular? Why Shannon Mahoney? Why did I fixate on her above all the other girls in my junior high school? Was it pheromones? Was it how she looked? Was it something about our particular genetic makeup? What the hell was it?

As I sat reading letter after letter at that counter in Verona, decades and numerous heartbreaks after the unforgettable Shannon Mahoney, I was struck by the fact that so many people were asking versions of these same questions, all wanting to know from "Juliet," this supposed paragon of romantic wisdom, how love worked. Some of the letters spoke of the pinnacles of happiness and joy, the high points of love. One woman wrote that she was in Verona on her honeymoon. "Thank you, Juliet," she gushed. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!" Others—I would say the majority of the letters—seared with the agony of rejection. "Why?" they asked. "Why is this happening to me?"

"Your time will come," I wrote again and again. But I wasn't sure that was true. My time had never come. Often I felt like an imposter and a cheat as I wrote "Juliet's" answers. When I thought about my own life, I knew full well that I hadn't fared well in the game of love. I was as lost as any of these sad hearts, and, really, who was I to advise them? Who was I to tell them anything about love?