

# *Part One*

“What’s wrong with your ruff?” Then Lance focuses to my chin’s overnight black whiskers.

“I slept on it. And some of the Nut Brown spilled. Naturally enough.”

“Yeah . . . yeah.” His eyes sunken in more shagbrow shadow than a usual morning. “Ah Harry *buzzitall*, *Buzz Lester* the moron.”

I did write creatively, before that did not work out. You’ll see why. I may as well say “*Buzzem* as he hath buzzed unto us.”

Lance was thinking not listening. Then to my silence, “One clumsy click on WhatsApp and our world ends. Pathetic. All for some . . . who?”

“Some Veronica. Which is a nice name actually. But still.” Lester’s immensely rich wife Valerie has a nasty pre-nup, nasty from the viewpoint of a younger husband with impulse control issues. And a hot temper from the viewpoint of all her 3,000 employees. At letter “V” on his shaky phone screen Lester made a very wrong turn off a cliff.

“But still you say. Still hasn’t even started yet, Harry.”

We are sitting alone in the former convent mother superior’s office, on chairs suitable for bad girls due a lecture. Amid tacked-up past Shakespeare production posters. The door is closed but our moment is growing more urgent as the Trenton Shakespeare Festival cast convene jolly-actor-style in the auditorium beside us. Lance now must go tell them we are all unemployed as of today. Lester underfunded us before he skipped the country. Our infant troupe is rent broke months in arrears, promised salaries defaulted too.

Lance is good at not speaking when he should. Sometimes troupe actors say he's not a helpful director. But it sharpens wit to guess what is in his mind. It does with this Hamlet anyway. Now Lance is not looking at me or anywhere. Women actors' lovely full voices penetrate the flimsy door, those are no uniformed unformed girls at sport out there in the gym hall. This mess is serious, play is not in it.

I wait to do as Lance tells me now. He was daring to hire me for Hamlet in the new company's debut. I only drifted into acting two years ago. In his way he did not tell me why my audition worked. But it's pretty obvious I am usually thinking of something else and cannot make up my mind. That's before the acting part. And too I bring onstage enough unseen baggage to fill a Fed Ex truck.

There is a double window beside the mother superior's desk, suited to close interrogation. Especially this morning, klieg-strength yellow light seems to be searching our minds. Lance silently studying his hands as if they are auditioning for some role. So I look around. The posters of Shakespeare productions we thumbtacked up are from other times and places. Our own new Shakespeare repertoire troupe, wholly sponsored by that impulsive recent patron of the arts Mr. Lester Laeme, has not staged even one performance yet.

The suddenly financially embarrassed sole backer Mr. Laeme completely forgot his love of Shakespearean production. Just two days ago he departed to live pants-down in Rome with a rumored Eurasian sorceress definitely named Veronica, definitely not named Valerie.

There is a big empty space on the wall beside the door. A TSF poster would have looked perfect there if it existed. Trenton, with its new public relations slogan, "One Hurricane from Greatness." Lester bought this concept of the area's future then skipped out on

the bill. But now I see another absence. Years of strong daylight have left bright paint under a removed form. The missing large sculptured crucifix outline is sharp-silhouetted there, glowing like an emulsion photo negative. Mean armies killed each other quarreling over the exact shape of its incorporeal holy spirit. But now the old convent here is just very tangible real estate. That TSF rented on its own incorporeal assumption.

I sit silent, thinking my flitting way about the nailed transcendent figure gone missing in a ruined convent leased at ruinous rent from a disappearing religion. Of which I not so young now was an altar boy. Thus am slow to hear Lance. "What?"

"I said the play's the thing. Wherein we catch the conscience of the Queen."

"Conscience of the King. Claudius, right?"

Lance is talking to his hands, being quicker than me. "Harry, our Queen is Valerie Farnsworth, who was also Lester's Queen until she cut his head off. But she doesn't want us as her subjects." That is sure so, at the beginning meeting I saw Valerie cared nothing about Lester's Shakespeare vanity project. She was just in sex thrall to her gorgeous bad boy toy. Valerie's only about science. Later she was always away in a business meeting, unless off somewhere harassing wild creatures.

Lance says to himself, "Valerie could be cast as one of the egos in a history play. If all the world, to coin . . ." Self respect checks him.

Lance hasn't looked at me again these minutes. I say toward his turned wavy, slightly grizzled mane, "So we have to get her to like Shakespeare because now she hates Lester. Snatch his pet project away from him?"

Lance's thumb touches his pinky tip. "Not her thing. Instead we need to catch our Queen Valerie's particular conscience."

This good light is encouraging me. “Sure, Lance. So you appeal to her conscience about dumping thirty actors out of work. Kiss her ring. Sure, she’ll never miss TSE’s overhead.”

“Wrong. Wrong thinking, Harry. You wouldn’t know her type from all your school life. A type not dreamed of in that philosophy.

“Some people who make a lot of money on their own work grow new strong principle. It’s unmistakable in them. Some particular eccentric principle appears over time jutting out visible as an unbuttoned new sexual feature. Being nice is not enough to get Valerie’s type to spend money she will never miss. Her kind of rich only extend themselves beyond self-interest on their own private principle.” Lance pauses listening to his silent self. “Their ego consciousness is like the normal conscience little people feel.”

For someone who I heard has been fired in anger quite a few times, Lance does have his flashes of insight. “So . . . so? What in Queen Valerie do we have to catch?”

“The mousetrap was your idea, Hamlet. You put a play within your own play’s real time. The mousetrap, the Murder of Gonzago story, that messed with the King’s mind. Right? A few special lines inserted blew Claudius’s perception wide open. So. Conscience in the sense of consciousness is what we need to catch Valerie’s interest in TSE.”

“So we rewrite the Gonzago lines to speak to her in the opening night audience? Saying, as actually Hamlet already does in a line, take good care of these worthy players?”

Lance cast himself as Hamlet’s ghost father. Old murdered Hamlet’s black-hooded cloak hangs on a hook at the window. Lance was an actor before a director. He stands and pulls it on, turns toward the door as if waiting for his son to appear to get haunted again. “No, Harry. I told you already. Valerie’s character does not

yearn to be nice to ordinary people." He's big now in the padded cloak, sunlight bounces off his outline as I look up in a squint. The room grows three beats silent, the way Lance stylizes lines onstage.

"Harry, this woman is a narrow scientist. She drives a big business with a hard edge. Her craves are mental fascination and winning in competition.

"So there is the itch that is our . . . rub. We need to reach Valerie's money by dangling a breakthrough big prize for her ego. Lester was just an aberration that's probably scarred over already."

From the other side of the door I am hearing dozens of murmuring happy greetings. Before Doom arrives too, weeping.

I just wait. Lance has got himself lost in his worry, then "How that can be done . . ." He can't help himself, really who could, "There is the question." A knock on the door. "What?"

"It's Ophelia, boysies. All the actors are getting fat on pastry waiting for you."

"Get thee to a nunnery."

"Already in one. Come *on*."

"Five minutes."

Not listening, I am still staring at the crucifix's lit shadow intaglio. Doubly hung over from this overnight crisis of our troupe's bankruptcy. At 3 a.m. I foresaw another losing hand in my personal life's poker game.

Looking at the crucifix space first dimensional, then shadow. Yet in surprise now lit as personality.

"Lance, do you know much about the Earl of Oxford's basis to be the real Shakespeare? That Oxford was the ghost writer of it all but the game got way out hand. Sort of like which dude was Jesus's real dad?"

I'm looking at my director with a Hamlet countenance, one

brow raised, which I do not consider corny if the smile is bitter.

“Of course, Harry. Most Shakespeare players have heard something about Oxford. Why?”

“Well, I know a bookshelf worth. One of the reasons I dropped my graduate work at Princeton was a professor who mocked my curiosity.”

“Sheppard Germaine, right? A rough don in the Stratfordian man mafia. They whack young scholars for disrespecting their plaster saint Shakespeare.”

“Oh yeah. I learned about that. I had started to realize that Queen Elizabeth actually was part of all the spectacular messes Oxford made of his life. I sensed that connects to why his identity as a writer would have been suppressed by her government. But then Germaine rejected my dissertation thesis proposal final as a bullet in the ear. He said it would put me on a track to unemployability by any decent university.”

“Too bad. You could have dared to be great. The Queen did selfishly cause a lot of grief for Oxford. But. But her forty years of volatile maneuvers as to Oxford ironically enabled him to produce Shakespeare’s writing. I’m an Oxfordian, Harry. But keep silent because I like to be employed. Directors too get blacklisted for nut stuff.”

Lance has never revealed anything personal to me. It must be the bullets whistling over our foxhole as bankruptcy’s line advances. So I am frank back. “I know that feeling. I chickened out. But my research was intriguing. What Americans let you learn as a kid, the good Queen Bess image, that’s a child’s cartoon. As I read deeper I saw everybody was afraid of Elizabeth’s changeability. Especially with her being surrounded by violent thugs at court who amounted to real Italian mafia.”

Lance nods knowingly so I go on. "Everybody in England was afraid big time. Her psychotic dad's head chopping off was continuous with Elizabeth."

Then my director turns back to the window, gone quiet to think our way forward.

So I think on too, going backward in my way.

Much of my scholarly reading is still in me due to a painfully good memory, though I stopped cold after bailing from my Ph.D. work years ago. For me the big takeaway is that Elizabeth's new type of made men capos were ambitious nobodies who got rich ripping off the rich. The wolfish Earls, Walt Whitman called her favorites. This Tudor-era turn against a thousand-year-old feudal order began with dad Henry's greedy predations. By Elizabeth's time anybody who crossed the borderline illegitimate Queen some way, or failed to pay due vigorish to her made guys, got their head whacked off fast. Martin Scorsese did not coin the term.

I recall more now, pulled out of the Harry Haines Memorial Trash Can Full of Melancholy Episodes. Part of my rejected thesis plan was to follow the consequences of Elizabethan literary controls. All writers got spied on by Crown agents. And heavy-handedly intimidated because they could stir up trouble. There could be no touching on the questionable legitimacy of Elizabeth as Queen. Or her covered-up sexual adventures and calamities.

So it came that very young Elizabeth had to step forward as Queen into an unsteadily ending feudal time. She had to assert her mysteriously God-given medieval right through her very shakily concocted lineage absolutely everybody knew all about. Including the part about her uncle beheaded for conviction on a charge of sleeping with her also beheaded mother. Everybody had already lived a half century under the Tudors as violent usurpers of old

aristocracy. And then stunningly cynical predators on a beloved thousand-year-old religious culture.

This latest Tudor upstart ruler is a woman, to boot. Who as everybody knows lived most of her life declared a bastard under permanent house arrest.

Elizabeth, in such vulnerability, Tudored on. She oversaw her own 40-year maelstrom of fascist violence, publicly blatant as well as covert. The Tudor dynamic continued inflicting enormous miseries on most ordinary people in sudden swerves of Protestant and Catholic bloodshed. First under Henry VIII Tudors had backed Protestants going lethal on Catholics, then under Queen Mary Catholics going lethal on Protestants, then under Elizabeth Protestants back in power as a police state methodically tortured and killed recusant Catholics. Some Pope in Italy offered an immediate pass to Catholic heaven for anybody who offed Elizabeth *The Godfather*-style, and several unlucky attempts were made. Jesuit jihadis constantly on the move. Crown spies networking all of Britain and Ireland in thousands. The Crown employed a half-dozen spies and counter-spies embedded in each of France, Spain, Italy and the Netherlands.

It's quiet now inside our room of doom, I muse on. For England the latter 16th century was suffused in existential dread. Catholic Spain, rich on heartless plunder of both the New World and the Pacific World, was determined to invade and physically wipe out Protestants. In 1588 it finally tried and failed only due to a hurricane and one problem general. And too, decade after decade, huge rich Catholic France was another threat of invasion. The beleaguered native Irish actively invited Catholic invasion through their island.

All this in 60 years. Making an ordinary guy's head spin if he could keep it. A lot could not. Always through Elizabeth's long era a half-dozen or more grimacing severed heads rotted fly-blown on

spikes over the South Bank entrance to London Bridge. They all said at once, "Remember this."

Now Lance is back mentally. And he's lightening up in foxhole camaraderie. "Harry, I knew I was right about you. Yes, all writers were scared of being tagged by the Crown. Chris Marlowe was killed at age 28 in a bar set-up because he habitually got drunk and talked too much about what he knew as a spy himself. And executed also because his chaotic violent spectacles were dangerously exciting big London crowds. He was deliberately stabbed through the eye. That was a brilliant theatrical touch for other spies and playwrights to remember. Marlowe's thug killer got rewarded with a government job."

I too feel camaraderie in this moment of garrulous unemployment. My hero Lance admires my scholarship. Thus encouraged, I show off to him a little. "You know this? Even silly comedy writer Ben Jonson was imprisoned multiple times for treason investigation, right? Some writers simply disappeared forever, and everyone in a small literary world knew the examples. For preemptive warning a few writers had their right hand chopped off, including Jonson's brother-in-law and his printer. Several authors had all their life works seized and ceremoniously burned, some on afterthought even after the Crown's censor had approved their printing."

When Lance looks up he's listening so I go on. "And . . . right, it's coming back . . . all that state menace and violence depended in any given moment on which direction Elizabeth's wind was blowing. But that direction was not always in her control, control freak that she was. She was prey herself."

"Beneath her bravado Elizabeth had to be terrified of populace disenchantment from some unpredictable source. There were always dark rumors. So Crown agents managed her image to be always positive. Fiercely eradicating any fact that might scandalize always

volatile public sentiment. Such as, to pick one, that England's saintly 'Virgin Queen' had a baby at fourteen after a secret pregnancy."

"Yeah, man, a fellow conspiracy nut!"

"Well, Lance, not nutty if it's true. In plain historical fact Henry VIII's widow Katherine Parr immediately married Admiral Thomas Seymour, and Elizabeth was sent to live with them in Chelsea. In documented fact, spies for the Crown reported that Seymour was fondling the girl alone. Another extant spy document records Katherine Parr became so agitated that one day she herself took out a knife and cut off Elizabeth's dress in a walled garden, obviously to inspect her for pregnancy. And seeing it was so then in very big documented fact Seymour, despite being the aristocratic top Admiral of the Fleet, was immediately imprisoned. And quickly executed in the Tower on a boilerplate treason charge. Of course the proceeding strategically not mentioning his impregnating a very close heir to the Tudor throne."

The guy can smile big. "This is Internet stuff, right?"

"But no, Lance, that is real book history. Period records are also quite clear that Elizabeth was suddenly then sent to live in the remote residence of an elderly Crown spymaster. And it is plainly documented too that from that seclusion Elizabeth made no public appearance or communication whatsoever from June through December 1558. Then in January 1559 she reappeared in London back in Crown business as a virgin Princess."

I was saddened to learn this bit of horror. "You can imagine all the psychic damage piled onto the young girl. Her father Henry VIII had previously declared her a bastard expelled from joining the Court. That was after chopping off her mom's head on a charge of sleeping with her uncle whose head also got butchered.

"Subsequently to the dangerous secret childhood baby her

half-brother King Edward also kept Elizabeth essentially imprisoned.

“Then after Edward’s sudden death Elizabeth’s fanatic Catholic half-sister Mary as Queen for a few years also kept her locked away in a country estate. Actually, dying Bloody Mary got so far as preparing a death warrant for Elizabeth to prevent her taking England back to Protestant control. But by a tick did not get around to signing it before God called her to Heaven to help Him out killing Protestants.”

Lance is looking into me with his director’s ambiguous gaze, which is multiple gazes. Looking back in scholarly pride I add, “So there was always a lot of deadly stuff going on that the Crown kept secret.” I am not going to overdo the raised eyebrow. “If the Tudor Crown needed to effect any cover-up conspiracy or to kill someone inconvenient, its agents had decades of expertise. You know about the Rainbow Portrait?”

Lance is just looking away. That means no in his vocabulary. I roll on. “Huge painting moved among the palaces with the Queen. Elizabeth is portrayed wearing a golden gown embroidered everywhere with large ears, large eyes, and moving mouths. The Rainbow portrait unmistakably says to every viewer, ‘I am powerful, I hear everything and you be careful.’” It’s on display at a London museum.

Now the smug sneer of Professor Sheppard Germaine blinks open before me. “To me, Lance, it seemed American-ivory-tower naïve to ask how ever the Crown, if it had vital dynastic reasons, could have managed to bury Oxford alive for his last two decades. While letting him write plays useful to the Crown in subsidized protection.

“Obviously Oxford was useful because he wrote stuff bolstering English nationalism through his many history plays. It was no

accident they were performed during the twenty years of threatened catastrophic slaughtering foreign invasion of England. And also Oxford's work helped the Crown by supporting the Tudor reign itself. With all those popular romances, tragedies, and comedies starring feudal aristocrats. Of course this reflected glamor on the Tudor regime."

Lance asks the nuntery ceiling, "So then how did Oxford go so far wrong? If he was so useful to Crown power?"

I just bear straight in when I really care. "Because, Lance, his personality was unstable, his actions unpredictable. And because to some dangerous politicians his well-known scandals would have made him evidence of failed aristocracy. In Elizabeth's reign weakened feudal entitlement was increasingly challenged by rapid social evolution. Especially by the rising tide of strict religious Puritanism. Whose future direction wise Tudors could intuit. And sure enough Puritans eventually closed all theaters in England for twenty years. By 1650 a King was beheaded by new type politicians. If she lost control of matters, Elizabeth's head could have rolled first."

Lance nods across the Mother Superior's desk. "Elizabeth was so vulnerable."

"So, sure, Lance, some pseudonym beard was necessary to avoid controversy over Oxford as one of Elizabeth's lovers. Since he personally was a walking poster boy for loose morals. And was writing emotionally edgy plays, with about 2,000 people attending every performance. It would have been explosively dangerous if Oxford, that flamboyantly irregular senior aristocrat of England, became known as the populace's beloved author Shakespeare."

He replies, "So sure, some nobody had to be put in Oxford's place as the writer common people could love in the abstract. Or who commoners at least not care about."

Fellowship in the moment's foxhole. "Indeed, Lance. For the Crown agents that strategic suppression and diversion of identity from Oxford would have been child's play. The way I see it there can be conspiracy dolts. As well as conspiracy nuts."

This really is more fun than imminent dissolution in bankruptcy of Trenton Shakespeare Festival.

Lance's nod is in his tone, "So from what you read, Harr, who do you think Elizabeth's baby became? Or did they just smother it?"

My own checking account is overdrawn, I am real broke. "Actually right now we have to get big bucks or we stay beheaded ourselves." I have been observing Lance for the three months since he hired me. So I show him I know where he was actually headed as he half-listened. "Ms. Farnsworth is English isn't she?"

"Indeed. Indeed. It has to matter doesn't it, Harry? Even a maths nerd growing up in Britain must have Elizabethans in her bloodstream. It would be better if her name were Elizabeth. But still." And then he's turned away again.

I notice it has grown quiet outside in the auditorium. Then realize that of course somebody has just reported to the group that TSF is about to disband before it can open. That from triumph of joining a glamorous new troupe near New York City, each actor suddenly will be cast back drifting alone in the sad slack wide sea of unemployment. So I hear them out there, now at murmur low and tentative. Waiting for Lance to come out and tell them officially. That they are already dead in Elizabethan decisive swiftness.

The door swings open. It is Ophelia, it is Miriam. She is diaphanously gowned for dress rehearsal in the flirty early scenes. I look to the crucifix place. This is not a professional attitude I have toward my co-star. I have only been an actor for a little while. Miriam messes up my Hamlet's ambivalence. I just want her to jump on me as I jump

on her. Lance seems to like the way Hamlet cannot bring himself to ever look into Ophelia's gaze. Harry does not like this feeling.

Miriam says, "Lance. It's time. If it be not now it be to come." My line of course. I believe I have mentioned that she is too much.

"Oh crackers, Miriam, this is serious."

"We're just actors. We need you to come out and tell us what is next. After that headcase Lester. I've actually met Veronica. A silicone job traded for Shakespeare. You couldn't make—"

"Sit down, sweetheart, take Harry's chair. Let's just be quiet a moment more. I need to look at you thinking." If Lance has ever hit on lovely young Miriam like Admiral Seymour on lovely young Elizabeth I have not seen it. And Lance has never come on to me or any of the other guys. Lance sexy-wise is in some other realm, maybe historical maybe not.

Miriam is only playful sometimes. "It's just so sad for everybody. Marjorie is crying and Gertrude doesn't cry."

Lance still has his dad Hamlet cape on. Turns his back again looking into the blazing clear liminal of the window. Just standing still silently silent the way he does. Thinking onward upward. Miriam watches hm. I may as well look safely at her.

And then Lance from behind is not the shape of defeated old Hamlet. For his arm pokes straight out of the cape holding his lit phone screen. He looks at the speed dial key, and presses.

"This is Lance, Gina. Is the great man in?" A pause, and then Miriam and I hear the beginning of the way both Queen Elizabeth and Queen Valerie just might save our pathetic Trenton Shakespeare Festival troupe from staying whacked.

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Ethan Hawke's intriguingly odd *Hamlet* film is set in Manhattan. Denmark is a global corporation headquartered there, owned by a troubled family.

The Valerie Farnsworth show is set in Manhattan too. She has no family at all, especially thanks to Veronica. But Valerie does have a global corporation. Which, Lance told me in our cab to meet her now, is troubled. Where I come from troubled means drink or drugs, I don't know what a troubled corporation does to forget its problems for a while. But the way Lance spoke it sounded as if he does. He went to business school at Columbia before ruining his financial security in theater.

We are coming to this meeting two days after Valerie cancelled Lester's donations to TSF. I know the immediately prior conversation of Lance with her was a 20-second phone call asking for funding of TSF's bounced rent checks signed by Lester. In response to hearing Lester's and TSF's names in one sentence Valerie explosively told Lance not another penny ever will come from her. This only took seconds because it is time-efficient to then just say bugger the hell off and slam down the phone cracking hard.

Somehow golden-tongued Lance did speak to Valerie again, and finesse this meeting. Anyway, here Lance and I are again side by side in interrogation chairs, await for Valerie to finish torturing someone on the phone. She holds the receiver beside her ear like a butcher knife. I'm not much for dyed strawberry blonde on a woman maybe 50, but its chiffon does enhance the English face.

Long-nosed, strong-lipped, wide-set dark violet eyes. Which unreasonably are set in blazing anger at mute me as she commands into the phone.

“I never said that.” Listening. “Don’t play the flipping moron with me, Clive.” Pause. “Well then he can try. Tell Sid to send him a threat letter. Copy his board.” Pause, listening. “No. Absolutely *no*! I am done with the deal. Fuck ‘em, Clive.” Without pause the phone slams into its scarred cradle.

Valerie is wearing a warrior’s cuirass. Tailored steel-color thick silk blouse instead of metal. But still. At the risk of offending those who disapprove of breasts I must observe for her age a high full chest line, in a sheer bra suitable for distraction of males and susceptible females. I think of old photos of Margaret Thatcher in her middle-age prime. As Valerie now turns her gaze to Lance I do too. He cleans up real good as they used to say in old cowboy movies. The navy suit is not hip, it belongs on a man of the world, not fantasies. His tie black, shirt white. He shaved, his hair is tamped down. Lance’s just slightly aging good looks are British too, if you ever saw a Richard Burton movie. Valerie can see a peer not a beggar if she wants. He is directing her that way.

And Valerie is directing us to be intimidated. Her wide plate windows look out cloud-high among lower high towers. There is nothing to see or think but straight lines in the big room and on outside to serrated, shrunken blue yonder. I’m thinking how this is the worst stage set ever for a scene of mercy mild.

“Who’s he?”

Lance, “Our Hamlet. Harry Haines.”

“He’s too old. What’s your big deal? You have five.” Valerie is too busy to say minutes and we’re not worth the breath.

Lance has had 20 years of bitch leading ladies. I heard from Miriam of a Lady Macbeth he cast solely for type without any experience, as I suppose he did me for Hamlet. He stands and walks to the sill of a window looking up not down.

“Shakespeare can help Omniconal.”

“He’s too old too.”

“But Valerie. That’s exactly the start of your easy cheap sweet deal. Your software is under attack in Congress. Professional whiners are protesting that Omniconal’s predictive artificial intelligence programming is . . . how to say? Finishing the sentence of electronic conversations like a nag spouse. Only now it’s coming out that Omniconal has begun originating statements the sender actually did think but did not decide to send before it flew. Some say your company is an insidious threat to national security. Even a threat to what’s left of society’s politesse, but that’s a fringe element.”

It’s not that you’re supposed to think Valerie means it when she smiles. She means it when she shrugs indifferently. “People only have a dozen primary thought matrices. The idiomatic linkage interstices within them turned out to be highly programmable once we developed effectively reflexive algorithms using enough personal data scrape. From there we just need to comprehensively flash-scan prior communications within each subject’s interfaces. Our step forward was from what cutting edge hedge funds apply algorithmically to business data—AI natural voice programming meshed. But our system instead uses personality algorithms. You’re right, Omniconal is quite similar to a wife smarter than her husband. She who knows in advance what the poor slob is going to say and do.”

“Congressmen with short haircuts from overweight States say you are playing God.”

Shrug, smile. “Nobody believes in God including them. And

nobody believes in politicians or the whiny losers. For an entire generation now people have chosen to function through machines smarter than they are. Billions of people now consent and many pay to have their little tiny lives publicized to billions.” She pauses, because of course we might quote her in press and she wants this next on the room’s tape recording. “One of the few new social matrices since Shakespeare is that many people see themselves as cast in a reality program that needs to excite ratings to continue life. We at Omniconal are just a public service to those who themselves healthfully choose to be revealed as they truly are in a given moment. We all must struggle bravely against society’s controlling hypocrisies. Omniconal is here to help.”

Lance, “And your—”

Omniconal CEO: “What’s the *deal*? I’m going to send you a bill for wasting my time. But I didn’t catch your name. I’ll send it to Hamlet here.” CEO Valerie is again glaring at me. I don’t need cloud-based math to see why. Lance for whatever reason did not tell me to dress up like an adult in a business meeting. I sit there in my loser loner wrinkled T-shirt and grimed blue jeans, Jesus sandals and hair to match.

This is not Lance’s third insufferable goddess. He looks seasoned as he wheels on his heels in a step forward that might get violent.

“The *deal*, Valerie, is that too many people with power dislike your smart-ass superiority. The *deal* is we can fix that big time for you. You will make yet another fortune from us doing so. Which you agree to share halvesies with Trenton Shakespeare Festival Inc.” Lance smiling to her basilisk stare, “And all TSF records will disappear the name of Lester Laeme. Though we want nothing to do with his poisoning in Rome.”

Valerie shrugs, "Now the fucker is in Verona."

Lance has a way of just dimpling like coolly admiring applause.

I seem to remind Valerie of another regretted offbeat lover. "Do we need Hamlet here?"

She sits down, crosses tanned arms I actually think are still cool. The wide-set eyes must be Norman blood. Very tough guys. And so gals. "You still have five."

A Lance signature move as director is characters refusing to look toward each other when they should if they were just ordinary people. He is back over at the window, looking up to what little to see of blue sky. "Seventeenth Earl of Oxford born 1550."

Pause. "Four."

Lance now places his metal tube chair alongside Valerie's chair at her black glass desk. In a low confiding voice after this stage business, "Your Omniconal software should be able to now somehow show that Oxford wrote the Shakespeare plays and poetry. A very bitter very important dispute about that has been going for a century. Involving suppression of the Oxfordians so harsh Queen Elizabeth's thugs would be proud. But now . . . Now, Valerie? Now Valerie Farnsworth with her gallant culturally woke Omniconal Friendship International Unlimited, Limited, in public service to the world at last breaks the case. To adoring applause of billions. And the clueless politicians back down due to your public popularity as a friend of the arts."

"You're Mark, right?"

"It's Lance."

"Whatever. I have a computer science and statistics Ph.D. from Imperial. And I never saw one play all my time in London. I like facts. I like manipulating facts faster than people can think. And have *zed* interest in plays. All the lazy sods dressing up like children."

Damned if she isn't staring harshly at my T-shirt. I forget what's printed on the chest but am too suave to look down.

Lance in the counseling devil confidential tone, "Which is stone cold of you, Valerie. Which is why normal people don't like you, Valerie. So some want to disable your programming. Omniconal puts together so much so fast so tight that what it says for people is very hard to disavow. That's scaring too many people lately."

She has a CEO smile that would terrify small children. "Just saying' is our corporate motto. A billion jerks at their screens love it."

"Valerie, everybody knows Omniconal is a cold bitch. You must realize resentment could round fast on you in politics. But—" This is *Godfather Part I* hammy, he even says it in low whispering reason's tone. "Look at me, Valerie . . . Valerie, with just a little money I can make you personally beloved by most of the world. And from your good deed make you richer off the copyrights and trademarks we will create. All inside three months.

"We have a great playwright. Our streamed production showcasing Omniconal will sell the genius-brilliant Earl of Oxford to the world as the true Shakespeare. Your people can come up with any bit of document fluff and we will shine it up bright, flashing as proof Oxford really was forcibly hidden behind a nobody beard guy not even actually named Shakespeare. I myself will be Oxford in the play. We booked Radio City already, streaming from there worldwide."

Her stone stare.

"And Valerie, there's you as Queen. At the explosive conclusion, we write in your cool cameo appearance for Shakespeare's great patron. So you come out to the footlights spotlighted in full Queen Elizabeth dress-up."

Lance should not do this. But he says enraptured to her chest not her eyes, "Sweetheart, you will dazzle everyone." Now he looks away, dazzled.

She says "Four." But that is a growing move upward at Valerie's glossed lip tips. "I deal one to one. Hop it, Hamlet." She picks up her quivering phone, pushes intercom. "Clarissa. Any caller gets a Number Two fuck off. Except Standfill, he's a Five and I want to hear your voice in here."

And then their real conversation began, after I shuffled away offstage. Lance told me of it later. But he is my director who does not explain well, in the opinion of some actors and readers.

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"The Rockettes absolutely cannot wear skirts over their sparkly panties. In their contract since what the 1930s. Dangerous when they kick. And besides, you know."

Izadore Mocha is looking into Lance's eyes very earnestly. For 50 years at this desk off Times Square he has looked earnestly into the eyes of businessmen and women who were not business yet. Lance told me he is the agent who got him cast as an actor, and later hired as a director, over 25 of those years. Mocha is power speaking facetiously.

"Iz, this is not *Kiss Me, Kate*. It's *Hamlet*."

"Those girls can dance anything. Very competitive femininity. Fourth wave kids."

"Come on."

I can tell this is the way it is for Lance talking to the old fox.

Feigned Shakespearean misunderstandings then Iz was there all along. “We don’t need dancing young ladies in panties. We’re doing a new kind of *Hamlet*. This is our Hamlet, meet Harry Haines.”

Mocha looks earnestly at me sitting beside Lance. I am wearing a rumply suit over a wrinkly T-shirt, Damon Runyan casting call style. “How old are you?”

“Thirty.”

Mocha speaks to a wall in his confidence. “Too old.”

Lance: “Come now. Hamlet was thirty in the play. And the Earl of Oxford was just maybe thirty-two when Queen Elizabeth began to dump him from her good graces after letting her gang rob him blind since he was a kid.”

“Duh. Who what when? Look, my friend, you rent Radio City Music Hall for one night you are going to lose your ass this guy just moping for three hours. The girls could be a warmup act. Square dancing or whatever the fuck Queen Elizabeth liked.”

“Okay. I appreciate your concern, Iz. But don’t worry about me. I have my own Queen Elizabeth now. She’s covering all costs. We’re not even charging admission. It’s a private party.”

“Then invite some of the girls to liven it up. I’m seeing the crowd at a *Hamlet* party . . . O . . . my . . . god. I went to a Götterdämmerung party at the Met once. Omigod.”

Lance does his little stagey trick. He picks up his interviewee chair and carries it over to sit close at the side of Mocha. “Old friend, this is the most important gig of your life. You are going to be one of the brave band of adventurers who save the life of Shakespeare.”

Mocha’s life is like Yankee baseball. Sometime he pitches fast tricky, then it’s his turn to get pitched to fast tricky. Lance’s latest he just lets pass.

“Iz, you and I know our Shakespeare because we grew up with

it, were young men with it in our souls. We all have some Hamlet in our thinking and feeling.”

Mocha is looking at me. I try to look three years younger. He looks away.

Lance is talking close to the old agent's ear like Claudius pouring stuff into old Hamlet's ear. “But with all the social change that new media brought, people are losing interest in Shakespeare. Now for most young people the plays are just odd old grandparents' stuff. The new generations want computerized impossibly buff superheroes. Everybody adores kickboxing red-hot women with goddess laser eyes. Cool is ninety minutes of monosyllables amid explosions.

“You're a twentieth-century guy, Iz. Me too. We know our Shakespeare. But dangerous language flowing out of complex people's emotions is just not in most people's awareness any more. Shakespeare's eloquent murderous royal courts a timeless time ago . . . just too weird. The young are drifting back into feudal mental serfdom. Chained for life to mass media that trivializes them by their own ignorant narcissism. Soon Shakespeare's subtle ironic insights could be lost as if never there to know about people's capacities.”

Mocha does pay attention. “Yeah. That I got, Lance. Yeah.” Mocha's shift of tone shows he sort of means to agree. Though considering his age and near departure from the scene, I intuit the future enlightenment of young ignoramuses is not really his thing. “Anyway, Lancey, I'm worried about your church gig in Trenton.”

“We can be okay. There's still enough spirit left around New York for a few small Shakespeare theaters. But Iz, look at me, hey *look*, this is way more ambitious. Our commandos are going to juice Shakespeare back alive after 400 years. Like Frankenstein when the lightning bolt struck.”

Mocha is not on the lightning beam. Real old to cast as one

of Lance's mental space commandos. "Yeah, I suppose, maybe. Kids now can't get enough monsters. And vampires. Probably reminds them of their computer dating scary hookups."

"Wrong thought, Iz. Shakespeare is not Frankenstein the freak. The freak is the man called Shakespeare who actually was absent from all that intense writing. Dangerous writing. Leaving a sense his ghost is hiding below story and words. But now instead the plays are mostly just presented as odd artefacts drifted to Earth from Mars. Some productions a little bit more cleverly colored in between the lines than others. But you know real theater, Iz. You know good plays are written from the author's real blood flowing out of his pen. Written in blood still welling out from under scars.

"That's our mission, Iz. We will put that shocking blood back into the plays. And credit that to a computer's commanding intelligence. Since computers have replaced both civil authority and religious authority. By the magic of our new vision, the young will be transfixed by newly supercool Shakespeare. Who we reveal was ignored as a kerflooy wastrel. But is *now* suddenly revealed to be the super-brilliant jousting champion and Queen Elizabeth's dancing stud, the longhair redhead rebel Seventeenth Earl of Oxford. A Marvel plot, isn't it?"

Iz turns back from his confidante wall. "Lancey? This is all from a one-night gig at Radio City? Come the hump on."

"Twenty-first century calling Izadore Mocha. We will film our night and adroitly flood the Internet for years. Replay will jolt billions of jaded people into seeing Shakespeare again anew. Meaning far cooler than the old plaster saint, far cooler than yet another new boy band or showoff girl. Cool as a reality show. Fascinating news for the jaded young and also the older crowd who did not know what they were missing. By our gig at Radio City everybody

gets special new glasses of perception below his 400-year-old brittle surfaces.”

Iz must have terrorized women when young. Sort of pensively: “As Mick said, ‘the real love, the kind that you feel.’ Kids are zeroes today about emotion. I have a granddaughter . . .”

“Good. So you *can* get it, Iz. Shakespeare really was not like some twentieth-century Broadway hack with a knack for cute stories. We can make Shakespeare real in real time to kids today. And also all the older people who tried Shakespeare’s plays but couldn’t get into the intense language. Because they didn’t know the really deep emotion involved in it. You on the team, bubba?”

“I got this, Lancey. I got that you got an artsy problem. I have told you and I have told you.”

“Wrong thought, Iz. Yes, just artsy is empty. But this Shakespeare revelation is for *real life now*. Because knowing that great mind newly deeper is a mental sunrise. It can bring more energy into an ordinary person’s own life dimension.”

Mocha has been staring steadily at me instead of Lance. “Hamlet, you had a mental sunrise?”

One should not be judged by one’s T-shirt. This annoys me. I say evenly, “Lance is right. When I speak the lines I visualize what in Shakespeare’s real world caused him to write them so. I feel the writer’s anger from the writer’s own experience.”

“He write you a letter?”

“The Earl of Oxford lived among particular people detailed in history books. They made a dangerous society that entrapped him. Knowing those people’s history plus Oxford’s life events within their world, we can feel his emotion that is in play in his plays. And how he morphed that reality into codes.”

“Eh.”

Smug old lizard. I say, "T.S. Eliot."

Iz back, "They were buddies?"

"Before Oxford was discovered in 1922 as the hidden Shakespeare, Eliot wrote a famous essay. Saying the *Hamlet* play clearly seems to be thinking about mysterious things other than its own storyline. Eliot named this the missing 'logical correlative' but looked no further."

"The story's enough."

Lance: "Harry, give Iz more. He's just pretending to be asleep."

I know pregnant pausing. "Oxford's deceased father the Sixteenth Earl was probably poisoned. By an agent of Robert Dudley, a rumored serial poisoner and sly murderer of his wife. Dudley then was Queen Elizabeth's hot lover. Who she unjustifiably appointed as guardian to control a lot of the wealth of the orphan little boy who just inherited to become the Seventeenth Earl. Which Dudley then stole from him majorly over years.

"Elizabeth was so sexually bonded to Dudley she went along. Actually in the same way Queen Gertrude does with bad-boy Claudius in *Hamlet*. Dudley in actual history gets himself made an Earl and lives in a king-size castle with his new stolen wealth. And, like *Hamlet's* Polonius, Burghley as the Crown's top fixer constantly spies on young Oxford. Lays fake new impossible taxes and penalties on him. And then Burghley manipulates twenty-year-old Oxford to marry his teenage daughter with threat and a huge big dowry. Plus clemency from execution of Oxford's first cousin and boyhood best friend. Both promises were defaulted. Instead of paying the dowry Burghley made Oxford take a big loan which he later foreclosed on, keeping a lot of mortgaged land."

Lance: "Good, Harry. Ring-a-ding, both stories. So Iz, for you *Hamlet's* now no longer just made-up stuff. It's coded anger of the

playwright about his own real-time entrapment by powerful people who kill and steal.”

Iz is back. “That would be dangerous.”

He’s on the line. Lance: “Very dangerous for Oxford but the guy had bollocks. There was a production in the mid-1580s at Hampton Court palace, for big courtiers only. Oxford probably managed and paid for the whole event as a surprise gift for the Queen, since Elizabeth never paid for her entertainment. At this early version *Hamlet’s* end all the coded bad guys plus Hamlet’s coded confused mom wound up sprawled dead on stage. The lights went up and all copies of the script were immediately confiscated and burned. Only after 1600 when both Burghley and Dudley were dead, and Elizabeth grown fragile, did Oxford’s mature re-creation of *Hamlet* appear in print.”

Lance: “So Iz, now you know why there is a rumor of a lost “ur-*Hamlet*.” It was Oxford’s completely suppressed first production from 1585. When by the way that Stratford guy was only 21 and still living there poor.”

Mocha sits silent. Then smiling yellow teeth: “So with Oxford as author you see Shakespeare characters deeper through to real people there under them.”

Lance: “Smart guy, Iz. The Shakespeare writing comes in high def dimensional if you connect Oxford’s biography to it. Big fun.”

Mocha is of course a professional bullshitter too. And does he know actors and directors. “Lancey, get your money up front from the new girlfriend. Radio City plays with real knives about rent.”