Light Wings

With love’s light wings did I
O’er-perch these walls,
For story limits cannot hold love out:
And what love can do, that dares love attempt;
Therefore thy kinsmen are no let to me.

—William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* 2.2.66-69

The play has not started. The crowd is still coming in, women and men in close-fitting overcoats, bringing with them the winter cold, the wind and rain of the Atlantic sea. They come from restaurants, a pleasant sound still in their voices, delight at their dash through the weather. Some are shadows moving over the glowing red curtain. A small orchestra below tunes up: a viola mourns; a bassoon goes up the scale. A percussionist hits claves, tabor, a bass drum.

The man sits with the woman. They are new lovers, and the man feels he is still in the sea of her; in the hotel bed, her smooth limbs like waves. The whole continent is falling into winter darkness. Cars are rushing over dark highways, swooping under bridges and building windows. The lovers lean close, in this theater; when the woman turns to the man, her eyes are bright crescents and her hair is black as a crow’s wing. Her voice is low. He watches her lips.

He saw her for the first time on a cobblestoned street in another seaport, eight days ago, a few towns south. She was looking at scarves and skirts in a window. He came up and said, “You probably won’t believe I’m interested in skirts,” feeling his heart beat in his throat.

“If I did,” she said, smiling, “I don’t think I’d be interested in what you’re offering.”

She was open, her smile immediate and honest. She wore a dark coat, a bright, green-print scarf that matched her eyes. Somewhere, distantly, the man felt his wife’s scorn—she would mock him for this foray into youth. She would tell him that, as always, he was dreaming. But the woman at the window had a stunning, inviting face, and no scorn for him. They talked for a few moments there at the store window.
There was a fog over the town. Christmas lights were atop the shop entrances, making halos in the mist. A carriage, drawn by clopping horses, went by on the street beside them. You couldn’t see the ocean, but you knew it was there, very close.

It was as if the man and woman were at the edge of the world. They walked together. She was from Wisconsin, she told him. Her husband was of old Madison wealth, and in and out of rehabilitation facilities with his alcoholism. In a marina a few blocks down, stays tapped against masts, a lonely winter sound.

“I live on Lake Michigan,” she said. “I would have liked to live on the sea. Do you live here?”

“On the South Shore,” he said. “I’m supposed to be on business, but I’ve probably been fired by now. I’ve just been driving.”

He could feel his confession move her, and when he looked up, her eyes were narrowed with consideration. Another carriage went by them: the driver in a top hat, a few passengers, men and women speaking easily, fading in the fog.

The man and woman ducked into a coffee shop. A gull cried somewhere in the raw day. Bells rang out cheerfully over the door. They took a table near a window.

“So you’re driving?” she said.

“I spend all day in a glass tower,” he said. “And I come home in the darkness.”

“What do you do?”

“Financial analysis. For a firm downtown.” But not anymore. It had been four days now. The firm would have called his wife. She was in South Carolina, but she would have surely contacted a neighbor to check on the house. His cell phone was on the kitchen counter, with his note:

Dear Margaret, there is no reason to worry about me. I am fine, and I know when you get over your anger you’ll see my leaving was best for both of us.

His wife could call the firm, since she had insisted he keep working there; she could tell them anything she wanted, make herself a fucking martyr. He didn’t care. She would be furious; she would be on the
phone with her mother and all of her town friends; he imagined her at the resort, a cell phone at her ear, gesturing with her hands, raging, planning. The sea outside coming onto the cold shore, thin and hissing.

In the café a waitress came then for their order. There was a small crowd, people laughing and talking in conspiratorial tones, the sounds of dishes, a coffee machine, fork tines, and knives on plates.

Soon their hot chocolates came, bowls of steaming minestrone soup, crackers, bread. A car went by the window, rumbling over stones; it turned up a side street into the fog. For a moment you could see a church spire over the town, and then it, too, disappeared.

“My husband started his cycle years ago,” the woman said. “Everybody covers up for him at parties, and he just gets blitzed and soon he’s drinking again and back in the hospital—sometimes we just say he is on business in Jakarta, because his family has offices there, but it doesn’t fool anyone. Are you married?”

He’d taken off his ring the day he’d started driving. It was strange how easy it had been: just slipped it into the plastic cave of the glove compartment, closed the small door with a competent snap.

A great beauty simmered in his new companion; her eyes were wide and pretty. She was perhaps in her late twenties or early thirties. Worry, over time, had pressed something grave into her face, thin lines into her forehead. There was the sweep of black hair that she traced back with her fingertips. A triangle of winter light fell on her cheekbone when she talked, when she turned toward the window. People went by out there, ghosts walking. She watched them; her lips were a shade of coral.

It was the first time the man had thought, truly, of cheating with anyone.

“My wife wouldn’t care much,” he said.

“About?”

“Being here with you.”

“Where is she?”

“Hilton Head,” he said, “vacationing. I made the mistake of not taking a job with her father’s bank when we married four years ago, and
she hasn’t forgiven me. So she takes daddy’s money and goes south, even now, at the age of thirty-nine—"

“You should be respected for being your own man.”

The man shook his head no. “I’ve been married twice to wealthy women who wanted me to be more ambitious financially. Emotionally, it’s like she’s on the moon. I just don’t seem to learn that things will end up this way.”

“You have kids?” she said.

“No,” he said. “You?”

“Yes,” she said. “A girl. She’s eight. My heart and soul. She’s with her grandparents in California for a couple of weeks. I’m supposed to be with friends here.”

He imagined her alone in the huge house on Lake Michigan, lion-tipped balustrades and a twisted winter garden and the flat, violet horizon. Waiting for her daughter to come home from school. The phone ringing; distantly, in hallways. Sometimes she answered, “No, I’m sorry. He’s on business in Jakarta. Can I tell him who called?”

They are making love in every North Shore hotel or bed-and-breakfast that catches their interest. They turn his SUV into a new one every night, progressing up the coast. Soon they will be in New Hampshire, then Maine; when they speak of going all the way to Nova Scotia, the man thinks of a television advertisement: a windjammer cuts across ice blue of ocean, whales rise to the ocean’s surface in great curves—relentless, singing, breathing life.

Each moment of flesh is a precious release. The man stares at the sweat of his lover’s neck, the light of her eyes. He kisses the curve at the deep of her back, turns her and kisses the taut arc of her stomach. She pulls him tightly when he is inside her: she holds his face in her hands and stares, hard, at him. She grabs his hair and pulls his ear down, and her voice is a rush in his head. Wind laced with sleet dashes at their windows.

Brazilian maids move in and out of their rooms after, transforming twisted sheets into fresh, flat ones, replacing towels, vacuuming and
wiping traces of them clean until it is as if their trysts do not exist. This morning, when they came up from breakfast, a maid, a silhouette two doors up the hall, tried to ignore them as they kissed desperately in the hallway. His lover tugged at his shirt buttons, tugged at his belt as he tried to get the card in the slot, pulled his undershirt free as they went in the door.

She touches his fingers now, in the theater, tracing the topography of them; the man can almost believe that he too is a ghost, emerging, made into temporary flesh by her passion. It is amazing to him that he has pretended for so long that one doesn’t need to feel what this woman kindles in him. He has an image of his wife, moving away from his body, his presence, in their spacious morning kitchen.

The harbor is very close, just off a boardwalk outside, and the man thinks he can feel it—high tide, the storm tossing the large fishing boats at their berths, making them chafe and bite at the wharves. There is a wildness out there, in the night. There are millions of illicit lovers touching, millions of ghosts. The rain intensifies on the roof, and in the dim theater someone, a woman, exclaims at the sound. The curtain of glowing red velour remains closed. On either side of the stage are great ceramic masks of triumph and tragedy, lit from below, shadows stabbing hugely onto the walls.

Now the lights go down. Outside the wind increases. A stay is rapping wildly against an aluminum mast, a broken slashing. The waves in the harbor are white. Seaport signs rattle and snap. The red curtain cleaves, and here in the hushed studio the actors emerge, shimmering; the orchestra plays something beautiful from another age. In this red, intense brightness, the man feels he is in the heart of some benevolent annihilation. There are things that he must work out, things he must think about; there must be some way for them to be together on some kind of steady basis.

But for now he watches with his lover, anticipating, with all of that story yet to come.