

“MUCH ADO ABOUT A GREAT DEAL”

They were both tall and dark-haired; both had brown eyes, she pretty and he handsome, although neither so pretty nor handsome as to impede foot traffic as they trod the UM halls on their way to English literature classes, their common major. There the similarities ended. Bea was enamored of Faulkner, Benny of Hemingway. The battle lines were drawn, although to Bea's advantage, as the battles would take place in Mississippi, unabashed Faulkner territory. Home-court advantage was hers. No matter. Benny hesitated not to enjoin the fray.

They were seniors. Dr. Pedro, the head of the English Department, taught most of the senior Lit classes and often presided over their debates. Although he strove to be impartial, he was a native Mississippian and leaned heavily in the direction of Faulkner, the only Mississippian to win the Nobel prize for literature. Faulkner was a Godsend for Mississippi, as other than himself and Thomas Lanier Williams, III, the state had little to offer in the way of literary prowess. Mr. Williams evidently agreed, and, at least for marketing purposes, disavowed the state and changed his Christian name to Tennessee. Wise man, he.

“Why does ‘The Sound and the Fury’ distress you so, Benny?” Dr. Pedro inquired one day, smiling inwardly as he ignited yet another literary skirmish between the two.

“His decision to devote a quarter of the book to ramble by a 40-year-old man with the IQ of a ten-year-old,” Benny responded. “The protagonist is making little enough sense when he speaks with the faculty of a 10-year-old, but, to make matters worse, many times during his narration what he says reminds him of events occurring years before. He then abandons his train of thought and is off to the Royal Ascot astride a different horse.”

“And how say you, Bea?” Asked Dr. Pedro.

Bea eagerly picked up the gauntlet. “All pertinent to the plot Faulkner is carefully laying out before his readers,” she asserted.

“Too carefully,” countered Benny. “Sentences become paragraphs and paragraphs pages.”

“All perfectly punctuated and grammatically correct.”

“And all we have as a clue when the 40-year-old narrator digresses to another point and time is Faulkner highlighting it in italics. Thank you for that anyway, Mr. Faulkner.”

“He presumes his readers are not as mentally challenged as his protagonist.”

The class had a majority of girls. They all laughed at her comment, Bea's best friend, Hero, she of the golden hair and blue eyes and courtly manner, loudest of all. Benny's own best friend, Claude, also in the class, stifled his inclination to laugh at Bea's retort and smiled encouragement.

“I welcome the unraveling of a plot if I am reading Conan Doyle or Edgar Allen Poe, for there I am forewarned that the book is but a puzzle to patiently solve.”

“Why then not allow Mr. Faulkner the same latitude?”

“He writes in a different genre.”

“He is not allowed to make you think?”

“To think, most assuredly.”

“Then think when you read him.”

“I said think, not perform algebraic equations. There are textbooks for that.”

“His Nobel Prize for Literature says otherwise.”

“They erred grievously in awarding him a Nobel.”

“The Nobel Committee erred?” Bea challenged, rolling her eyes towards her supporters.

“Indeed,” Benny responded. “I speak English, the tongue in which Faulkner’s books are written, and I scarcely understand them. I can but laugh when I contemplate a translator trying to portray in Swedish what is virtually unportrayable in English. I would love to have been in the room and watched the members of the committee scratching their collective blonde heads when read they a translation of ‘The Sound and the Fury’.”

“If they understand not, then why would they accord him the Nobel Prize?”

“Because they know they will be judged by the selection they make. If the author they choose writes wildly popular books all understand and enjoy, the committee members fret they will be accused of pandering to the public. If, however, they select an author who writes books few comprehend, they hope to be deemed intelligentsia.”

“Interesting theory, but theory still. I consider his award well deserved.”

“Then they have succeeded in duping you as well.”

“Words, Benedick,” Dr. Pedro cautioned. “Duping is a hurtful one.”

Benny liked it not when addressed by his full Christian name of Benedick. He preferred the less ostentatious name of Benny. Dr. Pedro knew well this and normally abided by his wishes, but nonetheless addressed him as Benedick when strayed he from decorum.

Benny dutifully offered a look of remorse. “Apologies, sir. I meant only she failed to understand the true reason the selection committee awarded the Nobel to Mr. Faulkner.”

“Your vocabulary is larger than most. Choose words less hurtful in the future, else I shall conclude the debate and declare Beatrice the winner.”

At which point did Bea wince, for disliked she being called Beatrice as much as he Benedick. She also disliked being labeled dupe and determined to tilt Benny from the lofty horse he rode. A plan to do so occurred to her, and she eagerly resumed the fray.

“What say you of Ernest Hemingway? Is he easily read?”

She knew Hemingway to be Benny’s favored author.

“He is,” Benny acknowledged.

“Is not Mr. Hemingway a Nobel laureate?”

“He is.”

“Are his books not wildly popular and read and enjoyed by many?”

“Yes, but---”

“Then did not the selection committee pander to the public in his case?”

“One of their few good selections.”

“Perhaps your judgment is impaired because you read too much ‘Argosy’.”

“And perhaps yours because you have taken up residence in Yoknapatawpha County.”

Her goal to unhorse Benny was proceeding according to plan, and, as she prepared to deliver the coup de grace, she could not help but smile broadly in anticipation and self-approval. Her smile was of such scope and charm, though, that it had an unanticipated effect.

Her smile both surprised and disconcerted Benny. Surprised, because he couldn’t recall her having smiled upon him before. Disconcerted, because the radiance of the smile was such it had a strange and debilitating impact on him. When first he’d beheld Beatrice, he couldn’t help but be aware of her beauty. Odd, though, how her comeliness seemed to diminish each day she looked upon him with increasing unkindness. Yet, when the same fair lady smiled so beguilingly...

The effect of the smile upon Benny did not go unnoted.

Whilst he struggled to regain composure, she unsheathed her verbal sword.

“Despite your difficulties in understanding ‘The Sound and the Fury’,” she probed, “you do admit to having read it?”

“I have,” he answered tentatively, having yet to regain full composure.

“Perhaps you recall the name of the mentally-retarded man who narrated the early part of the book to which you so strenuously object?”

He hesitated.

“Well?” Pressed she with prosecutorial fervor.

“Benjy,” he answered finally, and in a subdued voice.

“Benjy? Oh, my mistake. I thought it was Benny.”

Once again the class, save loyal Claude, erupted in laughter.

Benny didn’t need to hold his severed head in his hands to know a coup de grace had been dealt him. Although he tried mightily to disguise it, his expressive eyes betrayed his dismay and embarrassment. Bea saw well the look and read it fluently. It was her moment of triumph. Yet, instead of reveling in her victory, she could only take note of the angst she had caused him, and

that, for a reason unclear to her, pained her in turn. She could bear his eyes no longer and looked away.

When first she'd met Benedick, she couldn't help but be aware of his good form and fair features. Odd, though, how his comeliness seemed to fade each day he looked upon her with such increasing unkindness. An exaggeration, perhaps, but in her years of knowing him as a fellow English major, she could not recall him uttering a kind word to her. She had therefore deemed him devoid of feeling, and an unfeeling man held no attraction for her. Yet when the same man stood before her, unhorsed and stripped of sword and armor and his feelings laid bare, his appeal was heavy.

Nor did her look of angst go unnoted.

####

Dr. Pedro thought it his duty to remain impartial in these debates, so he waited until he was safely ensconced in his office before he laughed. Beatrice had repulsed the Faulkner onslaught with the ultimate weapon – if not the sword of Damocles, then certainly a sword dipped in wit and polished by banter. Benjy and Benny. The perfect put-down. Alas, poor Benedick. His face had turned red as a barn in Yoknapatawpha County, the fictitious Mississippi county Faulkner had created in which to base many of his novels, assuming, of course, one of Faulkner's tortured protagonists had not yet burned that particular barn down, as happens not infrequently in a Faulknerian tale. He also liked Beatrice's putdown with respect to Benny reading too much *Argosy*, a men's adventure magazine popular at the time. It was purportedly Hemingway's favorite.

Dr. Pedro knew Benny not to be simpleton. Benny had read well all of Faulkner's books and fully understood them. If there was nuance to be made, however, Benny's point was to make it and move on. Literature ought not be confused with Algebra. Beatrice, or Bea, as she preferred to be called, loved to linger over a phrase, to savor and embrace it. The romantic Beatrice, the pragmatic Benedick.

Despite their divergent views, they were brilliant literature scholars. Dr. Pedro had two master's degree scholarships to award for the next school year, and the two most deserving candidates in the pool of applicants were brash Benedick and feisty Beatrice.

Therein lay Dr. Pedro's problem. While he encouraged spirited discussion among his students, he had different criteria for master's degree candidates. They would also be his teaching aides, and teaching had to proceed in accordance with lesson plans. He couldn't have his aides confusing already bewildered Freshman and Sophomore English-Lit students with radically different points of view on Mississippi's sole literary scion. That, and he didn't think it wise to have assistants who so clearly disliked one another. He leaned, therefore, in the direction of selecting Beatrice and giving the second scholarship to a candidate carrying less Hemingway baggage. The debate between the two this day, however, had given him pause.

Beatrice should smile more, he opined as he rubbed his salt-and-pepper goatee thoughtfully. Her smile was a weapon of mass destruction. Benny's deer-in-the-headlights look and weak-kneed composure when Beatrice wreaked havoc upon him with her smile had not gone unnoticed by him. Nor had he missed her look of angst at Benedick's despair following delivery of her coup de grace. Dr. Pedro had now an inkling as to why they argued so, and he perceived what might be a solution to his problem, nay dilemma, for well-liked he them both.

He bade his secretary summon Claude and Hero to him.

"Together?"

"Yes."

"Subject?"

He smiled as he rolled his dark eyes toward the ceiling. "Knight-errant duties. "

####

Responding to Dr. Pedro's summons, Claude and Hero waited outside his office the next day. His secretary had found them easily, as they were always together. They were, to use the prevailing colloquialism, an item, and had been so for several years.

"Nervous?"

"Most assuredly," Claude answered. "He deigns even to talk to me, and now he wants to see me in his office?"

"You have done nothing."

"Therein may lie the problem."

"I doubt that. You've maintained your gentlemanly "C".

"Perhaps he thinks I underachieve."

"Wise man, he."

"Given, then, he wants more from me, but why summon you, an "A" student?"

"All know we're a couple. Perchance he wants me to encourage you to do better."

Claude's dismissive look told her he deemed that unlikely.

She agreed and spoke demurely, which she was anything but. "I'm but a lowly gatherer. You're the tall, broad-shouldered hunter with arms of steel and hair of flaming red. You tell me."

"Ask the better question then. Why does he want to see us at the same time?"

"Okay," The secretary announced. "Dr. Pedro's ready to see y'all."

They became even more nervous when the good doctor bade them close the door behind them. To Claude it was a dungeon door clanging shut. They assumed seats opposite the professor's large executive desk, which seemed more torturer's rack than desk to Claude.

Dr. Pedro read well faces and noted their apprehension.

"Fear not," said he. "Tis not a punitive meeting. I need something from you."

"Another term paper?"

"No, Claude, I read your last one. My appetite for your narrative is well-sated."

"What then, sir?"

"Am I correct in assuming that you are Benedick's best friend?"

"Yes, sir." It was an answer cloaked in question.

"And you, Hero, the best friend of Beatrice?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you two, as well, confide in one another?"

She nodded, but confusion still reigned.

"Speaks Benedick of Beatrice to you, Claude?"

"Often."

"What says he?"

"Will he lose your favor if I speak truth?"

"No, but you may if you do not."

Claude did not require the rack to reveal all. "He says nothing pleasant or complimentary about Bea. He views her as opinionated and inclined to champion always the reverse of what he would advocate."

"He likes her not then?"

"He views her as Katherina, the shrew."

Dr. Pedro smiled approvingly. "Well-said, Claude. All this time, thought I, you slept through 'Taming of the Shrew' when looked we at it."

"Only scenes when the shrew was absent. A compelling character, she."

"What says Beatrice of Benedick, Hero?"

They mirror one another, sir."

"Recollect you their debate yesterday?"

“Indeed. Benny blushed mightily after Bea had him recall the retarded man’s name.”

“True, Hero, but his blush but grew stronger then. It began seconds before.”

“When?”

“When she smiled so incandescently.”

“I took note of that, sir,” responded Hero. “It did seem to impact Benny.”

“Indeed. A smile so compelling he bared innermost secrets.”

“Such as?” Dubious Claude inquired.

“As a minimum, he hates Beatrice not.”

“He did have a strange look on his face. I presumed that---”

“That he was overwhelmed by the put-down?” Dr. Pedro interrupted. “I think not. I’ve followed their debates these many semesters. No matter the thrust, Benedick has always the parry. This time only wide-eyed silence from him.”

“What then of Bea?”

“She looked away, Claude,” Hero reminded him, “and very demurely, a gesture unlike her. She knew she’d won the debate but was chagrined that she may have hurt Benny.”

“Her look surpassed chagrin,” Dr. Pedro declared.

He watched as Hero thought upon the scene in her mind, remaining silent until she had viewed sufficient replay. “They love one another,” she finally said, amazement in both her voice and shining blue eyes.

“My opinion, too, which leads me to the good service I ask of you today.”

####

Benny took supper with Claude the next night in the cafeteria. It was New Orleans night and Cajun cuisine the fare. They filled their trays and sought out a table. Claude was looking at him strangely.

“What?”

“Nothing,” Claude replied.

“Out with it.”

“I felt badly for you yesterday when Bea bashed you so.”

“What, her argument was more valid than mine because the name Benjy is similar to Benny? Are debates now decided by the use of near-homonyms?”

“Technically, no, but judges often award style points.”

“For similarity in names?”

“For propitious humor.”

Benny rolled his eyes. His friend was right. He glumly returned to his meal.

“Want to hear something funny?”

“I welcome humor, Claude, so long as it arrives not at my expense.”

“You won’t believe me.”

“Try me.”

“Know what Hero told me today?”

Benny gave his friend a pained look. “Was I there?”

“No.”

“Then how would I know?”

“It’s a rhetorical question. Just say ‘no’ and I’ll tell you.”

“No, Claude, I don’t know what Hero told you today.”

“You do know that she and Bea are best friends?”

“I believe that is well-known by all.”

“And they confide in one another.”

“That as well.”

“Just as you and I do.”

Benny’s pained look returned. “Yes, Claude, I understand best friends confide in one another, just as you and I do. Now, pray tell me what Hero said to you?”

Claude was still hesitant.

“If you don’t tell me what she told you, I’m going to dump this plate of red beans and rice on your head and then rinse your red hair with iced tea.”

Claude tarried no longer, and, looking his friend strong in the eye, told him what Dr. Pedro had instructed him to say. “Bea told her she was in love with you.”

“She what!” Benny exclaimed so loudly it was near-shout. Every student in a ten-yard radius turned to look at him.

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Meanwhile, in another section of the cafeteria, Bea and Hero took their supper.

“New Orleans night,” Hero commented.

“The Cajun food? Far better than standard Mississippi fare.”

“You mean cold cornbread and overcooked greens?”

“Not my favorites.”

“You know, I felt kind of sorry for Benny in class yesterday.”

Hero took note of Bea’s reaction. She jerked her head up too quickly at his name and paused too long before responding with an innocuous, “Why feel sorry for *him*?”

“The way you put him down.”

“It pleased me to embarrass him.”

“I deemed him hurt more than embarrassed.”

“How can one with no feelings be hurt?”

“Such a person Benny is not. Despite his bluster, he feels. He has the most expressive blue eyes. They read like a book, not a Faulkner book, of course,” Hero laughed.

“His eyes are deep brown with flecks of gold.”

Correcting her on the color of Benny’s eyes told Hero much. Dr. Pedro was right. There was indeed something cooking, and all she had to do was but stir the cauldron.

“Did you wear braces when you were younger, Bea?”

“Two glorious years.”

“I thought so. You have the most beautiful smile.”

“Thank you. Your smile is nice, too.”

“But yours is a weapon.”

Bea looked up from her plate of Cajun food. “Why this flattery, Hero? If you want to borrow money, say so. I have \$11 in my purse. I’ll loan you \$5. No more, no matter how much you flatter me.”

“I am short of coin, so I might take that offer. I was thinking, though, about the way you besieged Benny with your smile yesterday. His face turned scarlet when you smiled at him. Surely, you took note of his chagrin.”

Bea’s fork paused in mid-air. It was her turn to hit the replay button.

“I noted him flush, but that was after I coup de graced him on the similarity of names. I smiled broadly prior to tilting him from atop his lofty horse as I so looked forward to doing it. A literary character he disdains having almost the same name? I was so proud of myself for marking that association I could scarcely wait to commence my interlocution. Hence my broad smile, which preceded my unhorsing of him and his resulting consternation.”

“I humbly suggest your wit was not the cause of his consternation.”

“What then?”

“Your smile. He suddenly realized how attractive you are.”

“Enough, enough, Hero,” Bea pleaded, reaching for her purse. “I’ll give you the \$5 now.”

“Those big browns of his got so dreamy when smiled you at him.”

“The same browns you just colored blue?”

“The same. Know what red-headed Claude told me?”

“Was I there?”

“No.”

“How then could I know what he told you?”

“It’s a rhetorical question. You’re supposed to say, ‘No, Hero, I don’t. Now, pray tell me what Claude said to you.’ ”

“No, Hero, I don’t. Now, pray tell me what Claude said to you.”

“You’re not going to believe me.”

“Well,” Bea said, her patience unraveling, “we’ll never know if you don’t tell me.”

“I hesitate to tell you, Bea. I scarcely believe it myself.”

Bea looked at her sternly. “Hero, if you don’t tell me what the hell Claude told you I’m going to spice your blonde curls with some of this Cajun food. Now, ablaze with impatience, pray tell me what Claude said to you?”

“He told Claude he was in love with you.”

“He what!” Bea exclaimed in a voice so loud that a girl exiting the cafeteria after her meal turned to a friend and said, “Everybody’s so uptight today. She sounds just like that guy we heard screaming on the other side of the cafeteria.”

“Exams draw nigh,” her friend replied. “Pressure comes to all.”

####

The following day the two knights errant reported to Dr. Pedro.

“Apprise me of Benedick’s reaction, Claude.”

“After severe initial shock, the news took him someplace I’d not seen him before, sir. It was as if he’d ascended into the heavens and saw beautiful things he’d no idea existed. There was much pleasure and gladness in his eyes. It was if he had been gifted eternal happiness.”

“Well-said, Claude. Perhaps I erred not in permitting you to remain an English major.”

“I warm to your tasking, sir.”

“A late bloom is equally welcome. Did Benedick evince disbelief?”

“At first. He bade me repeat my story over and over. Each time the glow in his eyes increased. If I sensed doubt, I told him of Hero describing the luster in Bea’s eyes and the beauty of her smile. Any doubts dissipated. In truth, sir, he’s soundly smitten.”

“And Beatrice, Hero?”

”Much the same. Shock at first, but eventually a softness crept over her. No longer was she the feisty Amazon warrior.”

“Did she express doubt to your message?”

“She did suggest Claude perhaps had misunderstood Benny or that Benny spoke in jest. I told her Claude had expressed doubts, but Benny insisted that when she smiled so ravishingly at him he no longer saw her as adversary but angel of love.”

“Agree we now that they love one another?” Dr. Pedro inquired.

“Yes,” his emissaries strongly affirmed.

“One thing remains then to be done.”

“What?”

“They must profess their love to one another.”

“How?” Hero asked.

“They must meet.”

“I don’t see that happening, sir,” said she. “They are both too proud, and, at the same time, too shy, to call and ask to meet.”

“You and Benny have similar voices, Claude. Hail you from the same area?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Their voices are much alike,” agreed Hero.

“Call her, Claude, posing as Benedick. Tell her you wouldst meet with her.”

“Meet where?”

“Where you and I did court, Claude,” his lady suggested. “The benches outside this very building. Students often meet there. It’s dimly light at night and very romantic.”

“Suppose I screw it up?”

“Then I’ll claw your eyes out,” she threatened.

“And I will flunk you for the two advanced English Lit courses you’re taking.”

Claude nodded. “Your reasons for successful execution of my tasking are soundly argued.”

####

Hero visited Bea that night.

“You do not seem yourself, Bea. Does all go well?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

“How will you pass your night?”

“I don’t know. Stay in my room and study, I suppose.”

“I must leave to meet Claude. Until the morrow then.”

Hero departed.

Bea knew full well what ailed her, an affliction with the odd name of “Benedick”. Since Hero had told her of Benny’s love, she’d been in a daze. She’d seen him several times after their “Benny and Benjy” debate, but there’d been no desire by either to again cross swords. She’d exchanged glances with him on occasion, and she could tell by his eyes Hero had spoken truth. He was the proverbial “deer in the headlights”, possessing a vulnerability she’d not seen before. It was easy for her to now discern his love – although still hard to believe. She studied her own eyes in each mirror she passed. Her eyes looked remarkably like his.

A knock sounded on her door. “A phone call for you, Bea.”

“Who calls?”

“A plaintive male.”

She thanked the girl who delivered the message and hurried to the phone each floor in her dorm had. It could be anyone. Her visceral, though, told her who called.

“Hello,” she spoke.

“It’s Benny.”

His voice challenged composure. She fought back emotion and managed to speak.

“Hello, Benny.”

“I would see you, Bea. There’s something I have to tell you. Can you meet me by the benches outside the English building, the ones near Dr. Pedro’s office?”

“When?”

“Anon. At eight.”

“Are you sure, Benny?”

“I have no doubts.”

“Can you not speak over the phone?”

“No, I must look into your eyes.”

“I’ll be there.”

He was overwrought, she mused, as she hung up the phone. Almost as if another spoke. She rushed to prepare herself.

####

Claude was a nervous wreck when he hung up, but he’d pulled it off. Bea had believed it was Benny on the phone and agreed to meet him at eight. He rushed to Benny’s room. Benny’s roommate was out, and he was standing by the window staring at the giant moss-laden oak that engulfed the quadrangle below.

“Benny, I bear news.”

“Be warned. I slay messengers who bring ill tidings.”

“The tidings are good. Bea told me Hero wouldst meet with you tonight.”

Benny whirled round from his perusal of the oak. “To what end?”

“To tell you she loves you.”

“When?”

“Anon. At eight.”

“Where?”

“At the benches by the English Department.”

“I don’t know, Claude,” Benny said, beset with doubt.

“What do you mean, you don’t know? She loves you. She wants to tell you so. Get your ass over there. You know you’re in love with her.”

“I…”

Claude fought back surging panic. It never occurred to him or his co-conspirators Benny might chicken out. They just assumed their plan would work. If Benny didn’t show, that would definitely be the end of it. The romance that never was would now never be.

He nervously grabbed Benny by the shoulders and shook him. “If you don’t show up, that’ll be it. There will be no second chances. Answer me true. Do you love her?”

An agonizingly long pause ensued. “Yes,” Benny eventually said, almost in whisper.

Claude breathed again. “Tell not me but her.”

“I will.”

“Some advice first from Hero, who knows her well.”

“Speak.”

“Bea is shy. She cannot speak of love unless she first knows she is loved.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“She may equivocate.”

“And if she does?”

“You must quickly silence her.”

“Quickly silence Bea? A Herculean tasking. Did helpful Hero hint how?”

Claude apprised him of Hero’s advice.

#####

Benny could hardly believe it was happening. He knew now he’d loved Bea since first they met. She was beautiful, and he loved her strong voice and quick wit when they had their take-no-prisoners debates. He was never sure why their relationship had turned adversarial. No insults were traded, nor gauntlets dropped. It just evolved.

Benny knew now the answer. Neither was willing to take the first step towards courtship. Each concluded the other was disinterested. Each day hurt grew. Resentment festered. Eventually swords were unsheathed.

He sat at a bench outside Dr. Pedro’s office, looking nervously around. Suddenly, as if she had appeared in a whiff of sorcerer smoke, Bea was standing above him.

“I’m here, Benny.”

He quickly rose and stood close to her. “Can it be true, Bea?”

“Can what be true?”

“That you love me?”

“I can only love if I know I am loved, Benny.”

“Did you not tell Hero you loved me?”

Her puzzled look told him no before she answered. “No. Did she tell you that?”

“No. Claude did.”

“Did you not tell Claude you loved me?”

“Yes, not 15 minutes ago.”

“How could that be? You were talking to me on the phone then.”

“Talking to you on the phone? No. Fifteen minutes ago Claude rushed into my room and told me you wished to see me here in this park, that you were going to profess your love for me.”

“It was Claude then who called me, pretending to be you. It didn’t sound like you, but I told myself it was the excitement of the moment affecting you so. Hurried I here then to hear your message.”

“Then you didn’t tell Hero you wanted to meet me here tonight at eight?”

“No.”

“Have you no message for me?”

“None, other than our friends have played a cruel joke on us.”

She turned to leave.

Seconds can be eternity, and in those seconds the plot unfolded before Benny. Bea could not have been more wrong. It was not a cruel joke played on them. Their friends knew they loved one another, and they sought but to make them realize what they had so long ignored. And now Benny came to fully appreciate Hero’s advice.

He reached for Bea’s slender arm and turned her to him. It was the first time he’d ever touched her. Her skin was smooth and warm. He looked into her eyes, and, even in the dim light of the small park, he could perceive her disappointment.

“It was indeed I who called you, Beatrice, and asked you to meet me here tonight.”

“Why did you not say so?”

“I was afraid you would turn me away, so I pressed you to say you loved me before I gave you my message. Rejection and I are not friends.”

“Nor he a friend of mine. What then is your message, Benedick?”

“That if you equivocate I will silence you.”

“Silence me? Having failed these many months, how do you propose to do so now?”

“With a kiss,” he whispered and took her in his arms.

THE END.

