

Romeo and Juliet

Once, in a sweltering Italian city named Verona, one man wronged another. It does not matter who wronged whom or how. It is enough that they remembered to hate one another, and taught their brothers and wives and children to hate each other's brothers and wives and children, each generation passing on its hatred to the next. In Verona the Montagues hated the Capulets: the old men wrangled in the streets and lost their dignity; the young men brawled in public and lost their lives.

Their stupidity infuriated the Duke of Verona. He passed edicts forbidding street affrays. The Montagues and Capulets bowed meek heads in front of him and swore things would be different in future, but

inwardly they merely postponed their feud to a later date.

Young Romeo was a Montague, so he and his friends naturally hated the Capulets. They welcomed the smallest opportunity for a fight. And when they were not fighting, they were falling in love.

Romeo was forever falling in love – with a desperate fervour, though rarely for more than a week. His friends Benvolio and Mercutio were used to it. But on the subject of the latest, 'divine Rosaline', Romeo was in danger of becoming a bore. He moped and sighed about the place and declared himself at death's door because Rosaline did not return his love.

To cheer him up, Benvolio and Mercutio dragged him along to a party at the Capulet house. The fact that everyone wore carnival masks enabled them to gatecrash with ease, and it seemed clever to filch Capulet food and get merry on Capulet wine. The intention was that Romeo should see some new face to take his mind off Rosaline's. In the event, his well-meaning friends were to regret their success. For the face Romeo saw was that of Juliet, daughter of the Capulets. She was fourteen and extremely beautiful.

All Romeo's adolescent crushes, all his imaginary excursions into love, crumbled to nothing. They

had all been rehearsals for this: love at first sight, love given and received in a single meeting of eyes. Without even knowing each other's name, Romeo and Juliet fell in love. As their fingers intertwined, so did their lives.

With a flurry of ruffled feathers, the Montague intruders were spotted. Juliet's cousin Tybalt would gladly have run his sword through Romeo then and there, but for the laws of hospitality and the Duke's edict. As it was, he swore to cross swords with Romeo at the very next opportunity. Romeo was oblivious to the vexation he was causing. He left the house . . . but could not leave its grounds; the presence of Juliet held him there, like the cord which ties a hawk to the falconer's wrist. He waited under her balcony for a glimpse of her, and was rewarded by hearing her speak his name over and over – 'Romeo! Romeo!' – struggling to come to terms with loving a Montague.

O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?

Juliet, ACT II, SCENE I

But soft, what light through yonder window breaks?

It is the east, and Juliet is the sun . . .

See how she leans her cheek upon her hand.

*O, that I were a glove upon that hand,
That I might touch that cheek!*

Romeo, ACT II, SCENE I

*Good night, good night! parting is such sweet sorrow,
That I shall say good night till it be morrow.*

Juliet, ACT II, SCENE I

He spoke to her out of the darkness, and climbed up to steal a kiss. There was no shyness between them, no elaborate courtship. Time was too pressing and the danger of being discovered too great. It was Juliet who proposed they marry next day. No one else in the world must know, except for the Friar who was to marry them and the go-between by whom Juliet sent word of where and when.

The go-between was Juliet's old Nurse, a jolly, rollicking woman as devoted to Juliet as mother and friend rolled together. During her long life she had seen love in all its guises, and was still as melted and moved by it as a young girl. With her help, Juliet was able to arrange to meet Romeo at Friar Laurence's cell in the monastery, where both were in the habit of going to confession.

My only love sprung from my only hate!

Juliet, ACT I, SCENE V

The Friar himself was touched with the same fond, sentimental faith in the power of love as the Nurse. He agreed to perform the marriage, hoping that in some way it might put an end to the families' feuding. It would call for careful timing, though, to break the news that a Montague had secretly married a Capulet.

Whistling and dancing with his shadow across Verona's marketplace, the blissfully happy Romeo overtook his friends Mercutio and Benvolio. He was in love with the whole world. Suddenly, though, his shadow collided with another – that of Juliet's cousin Tybalt, roaring boy and fighting cock of the Capulets. Tybalt was holding a drawn sword.

'I'll teach you to come to a house uninvited, Romeo Montague!'

But Tybalt did not receive the reaction he was expecting. There were no snarled insults, no braggartly threats given in exchange for his.

Romeo said, 'I don't want to fight you, Tybalt. I can't! You would understand if you knew ...'

'Oho, I do! You're a coward, I know that! Too scared to fight!'

'No, Tybalt, on my oath, I ... I can't explain why, but God knows, I've more cause to love you than hate you this morning.'

'Romeo?' His companion Mercutio was horrified. 'What are you saying? Here's this filthy Capulet calling you out, and you tell him you won't fight with him? Well, if you won't, I will!'

'No, you don't understand, Mercutio.'

But Mercutio's sword was already drawn. If Romeo would not fight, then he would have to defend the honour of the Montagues himself. He was too disgusted with Romeo to pay him any more attention, and Tybalt was in no mood to listen either. Though Romeo ducked and dodged between them, pleaded with them to put up their swords, the blades clashed and the curses flew. Romeo dived between them and restrained Mercutio's sword arm. Tybalt seized the opportunity to lunge. The blade passed under Romeo's arm and pierced Mercutio in the heart. His dearest friend died in Romeo's arms, cursing Montagues and Capulets alike.

Blinded with rage, Romeo snatched out his sword and ran Tybalt through – forgetting Juliet, forgetting the edict, forgetting what a price there would be to pay.