

Already the alarm bells were ringing: the city guard were on their way. Nothing remained but to run or face arrest. Romeo fled to the monastery, and there Friar Laurence brought him the news – that he was banished from Verona for ever.

‘Leave Verona? Leave Juliet? I’d sooner the Duke had condemned me to death!’

Friar Laurence told him off roundly for such a foolish, defeatist attitude, and dispatched him to visit Juliet one last time before fleeing the city.

Romeo hardly dared face her. Meeting the old Nurse, he found her bitterly grieved by Tybalt’s death. She had always adored the boy – the whole family had. Now all her bawdy jokes were extinguished, her face grown as grey as her hair. And if the Nurse was so very altered by grief, Juliet too might have changed.

‘Does Juliet hate me for killing her cousin?’

‘She hardly knows which to cry about more – Tybalt’s death or your banishment,’ said the Nurse, her eyes cold and embittered.

But once they were together, Romeo and Juliet rebuilt heaven out of the ruins of the day. One night was theirs before Romeo was obliged to flee the city or die. But it was a long, sweet night, which increased their love still further. One life was ending, but another would

soon begin for them, outside Verona. Once reunited, they would rely solely on each other for their future happiness.

So Juliet’s parents, visiting her bedroom a few moments after Romeo’s departure, seemed like intruders, strangers. ‘Your father, my dear, has arranged a day of happiness to mend all your heartache over Tybalt’s death,’ said Juliet’s mother. ‘Next Thursday morning – just a couple of days from now, my goodness! – the Count of Paris will be waiting at the Church of Saint Peter’s to make you his bride. There now! What do you say to that?’

‘I say he shan’t . . . I mean he can’t . . . No! Never! It’s not possible!’

Her parents’ indulgent faces froze over. They called her ungrateful, wilful, obstinate. When she dared not explain herself, her father flew into a rage and told her she *would* marry the Count or be turned out of the house, disowned.

In her desperation, Juliet ran to Friar Laurence. ‘What shall I do? I’m already married to Romeo! I’d sooner die than marry Paris!’

‘Die? Yes . . .’ mused the Friar. ‘And so you shall, my child – or something like it – if you have the courage to do as I say.’ He gave her a potion whose effect would be

to suppress all signs of life, without actually killing her. 'Go home and tell your parents you are ready and content to marry the Count of Paris. Then, on Wednesday night, drink this potion. Your parents will come to wake you for your wedding, and – God pity them! – think you dead. Your body will be carried on an open bier through the city – as Tybalt's was today – to the Capulet vault in the churchyard, and laid among your ancestors. I'll send word to Romeo to come at once. He'll be there at your side when you wake, and you can leave the city together. The world's larger than Verona, you know. There must be room in it somewhere for true lovers to be together.'

This time Juliet could not even confide in her Nurse. The contents of the bottle terrified her. She drank deeply, even so. The shriek that went up in her bedroom next morning echoed through the streets and set all the starlings circling in a black cloud over the city.

*O woe, o woeful, woeful, woeful day,
Most lamentable day, most woeful day
That ever, ever I did yet behold.
O day, O day, O day, O hateful day,
Never was seen so black a day as this.
O woeful day, O woeful day.*

Nurse, ACT IV, SCENE III

Juliet lay on her bed, cold, white and still, with no more sign of life than her cousin Tybalt when he was carried home from the marketplace. Friar Laurence heard the weeping and comforted the distraught parents. But *he* did not weep. He congratulated himself that there was a letter even then speeding along the road towards Mantua, where Romeo sat waiting for news. It explained everything – the potion, the reason for it, the need for Romeo to return at once, in secret, and keep vigil in the tomb beside his sleeping wife.

But the letter went astray. The messengers carrying it were detained by a plague scare on the road to Mantua, and the first and only message to reach Romeo was of Juliet's death. Nothing of the plot, the rendezvous or the remedy.

He bought poison and rode back to Verona as fast as his horse would carry him. He found what he had no reason to disbelieve: the corpse of Juliet lying in her family's tomb. It was the work of a moment to drink down the poison and set off in pursuit of Juliet's soul on the starry climb to heaven.

*O my love! my wife!
Death, that hath suck'd the honey of thy breath,
Hath had no power yet upon thy beauty:*

*Thou art not conquered. Beauty's ensign yet
Is crimson in thy lips and in thy cheeks,
And death's pale flag is not advanced there.*

Romeo, ACT V, SCENE III

When Juliet awoke, she found Romeo lying by her side. His body was still a little warm from life, but touched by icy death. 'What, didn't you leave one drop for me?' she said reproachfully, holding up the empty poison bottle. Then she drew his dagger and quickly sank it in her heart; there were voices and footsteps outside, and she had no wish to be stopped in her pursuit of Romeo.

Friar Laurence would surely have done better to tell the truth, to have spoken up and said, 'Juliet can't marry Paris. She is already married – to a Montague.' But though he was cowardly and misguided in what he did, he proved to be right about one thing. The love of Romeo for Juliet *did* unite their families – not in the joys of a wedding but in their inconsolable grief.

As they stood in that vault and saw Juliet, lost to them twice over, and Romeo, banished not from Verona this time but from the earth, their grief was too deep for thoughts of vendetta. Montague and Capulet shook

hands in a pledge of peace. But the hands they clasped felt already as dusty and frail as those of the skeletons who watched from the shadowy shelves of the Capulet tomb.