

Hamlet, a love story

AFTER THE AFTERPARTY, I slept with Callum. I hadn't intended to – though as it was happening something about it felt inevitable. That night he'd run the play straight through, no loops – from the wings it felt taut and direct, Hamlet hurtling towards his fate. As Ethan's Horatio spoke the *flights of angels* lines he was actually trembling, and when Aoife's Fortinbras said the final words of the play, just as the big clock chimed, she stumbled over them, and I thought she was going to cry. Outside of rehearsals, none of those words had ever been spoken before. In the dozens and dozens of times we'd done the play, Hamlet had never died. But he was dead now. They were all dead, finally, everyone who had to be. It was over.

It was the end for me because I hadn't played Ophelia this time, and if the production did go on to have a proper off-Broadway run they'd recast anyway, American actors, union crew. It was Callum's farewell in a different sort of way – not just to the play, but to a particular stage of his life. He was the lead in a forthcoming feature film, an indie adaptation of an Irish novel that was going to premiere at

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Sundance and was tipped to do well. He'd a new American agent who'd set up a series of meetings for him next week with producers who'd come to the show; he would then fly out to California, to Palm Springs, where he was shooting an ad campaign for Calvin Klein. He'd worked out every day of our run in New York, in a boxing gym a block from the theatre, and they'd a personal trainer booked for him for an intensive fortnight before the shoot – it was next-level. People in the company took the piss, but you knew it was all just about to take off for him. At times I thought you could see him thinking how he'd look back on these days of black-box theatre, imagining how he'd talk about the wild and creative freedom you had as a twenty-something just a couple of years out of drama school. An edgy, choose-your-own-adventure-style production of *Hamlet*: he'd romanticise it; all this would become part of another, bigger machine of a story. Maybe I was being unfair to him. Despite the rave reviews in the New York press, which were for him as much as for the play, none of us had ever thought of the play as properly his. But he'd done something for us that night – something only he could ever have done.

There's a particular energy to parties the night a production finishes. It's a staving-off of the melancholy, a sort of fuck-you to everything that's going to come down on you tomorrow, the things and the people you've neglected,

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the grind of whatever it is you have to get back to in order to pay the bills. It's something more existential too: you've all come together for the intense duration of the play, you've made something together, and now it's over. Together you were greater than the sum of your parts, and now you're alone again, diminished. The best description I ever read of that feeling was not about the theatre at all – it was a philosopher on a podcast talking about the trillions of different atoms that have come together to make a body, and then the body dies, and they go their separate ways, all the carbon and hydrogen and oxygen and copper and manganese, and yes they'll be other things, they'll recombine in different ways, but they'll never be *that* thing again, that unique and particular combination of life. That's what it's like, or at least what it feels like by the afterparty.

Ours had started off with drinks in the theatre bar, after which we'd gone to a gay Western-themed place called Flaming Saddles with country music and bar staff in Stetsons and chaps, who'd burst into Broadway-calibre dance routines. There'd been rounds of tequila shots, and more tequila shots, then we'd moved on to some underground dive – a proper old-school dive bar, sticky floors and low ceilings, walls covered in stickers and graffiti, to which we added our own, *Cast of CYOH*, and the date.

I got so drunk – we all did, even Callum had a couple of beers. I hadn't had much to do with him over the course of the run. But that night he made a point of seeking me out. I was standing by the entrance, with the smokers. I'd

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never been a smoker myself, but you could stand with a vape and people assumed you'd a purpose and left you to it. That was mainly my strategy these days.

'Sonya,' Callum said, squeezing into the vestibule beside me, and he held up his Budvar. 'I just wanted to say,' he said. 'To you. To the play. To everything.'

I tipped the neck of my bottle to his. 'Right,' I said. 'Thank you.'

'Being serious,' he said, 'was that ok tonight, what I did?'

'Yeah,' I said. 'Sure it was your call, that's the point of the play.'

'It is a fucking incredible play,' he said. 'Honestly. I'm not just saying that. I think you're a fucking genius.'

His eyes were shining – glazed with admiration, or adrenaline, or maybe just alcohol. I felt all of a sudden done in. I didn't have it in me to launch into some kind of deep-and-meaningful now, and especially not with Callum.

'I'm pretty wrecked,' I said before he could say any more. 'I was actually just heading on.' I meant it in a shutting-things-down way, but he was too drunk to take my hint, or maybe he thought I was too drunk to be heading off into Hell's Kitchen alone.

'No, no,' he said, 'I totally understand. I should leave too, before it gets even messier. Here, I'll walk back with you.'

'Honestly,' I said, but he was already ushering me on up the metal stairs.

'It's always easier just to slip away,' he said. 'The good old Irish goodbye.'

We walked the half a dozen blocks back along Tenth

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Avenue, the red-brick buildings with their external fire escapes that made you think instantly of *West Side Story*, the blackened ginkgo trees still clinging to their last yellow leaves, the late-night bodegas and the all-night laundromats, the liquor stores and the holes-in-the-wall serving slices of pizza, the fire hydrants and the steaming grilles in the street, the vacant lots and graffitied hoardings, the taxis and the swoop of sirens, the way the traffic at the intersections halted then cleared, halted and cleared, the skyscrapers of Midtown Manhattan ahead of us and a full moon fully risen as we turned off towards the Hudson and our aparthotel, and all I could think, all I'd been able to think the whole time I'd been in this city, was how much Spence would have fucking loved it.

In the empty lobby, the lift took ages to come. With the right person it might have been funny, but it just felt awkward. I didn't want to be there with Callum. I didn't want to be anywhere with anyone. I shouldn't have come to New York at all, I thought, though I knew I couldn't have not.

The lift finally came and we got in and pressed the buttons for our respective floors; watched the doors slide shut and the illuminated numbers begin moving up.

'Right, well,' I said as it approached mine.

'I've got weed,' Callum said. 'I've got this weed vape-pen thing.'

It was the last thing I would've expected to hear him say: I laughed at that. 'I wouldn't have had you down as a stoner, Callum James.'

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‘It’s been the only way I can get to sleep,’ he said. ‘Sonya, I know it’s been intense for all of yous, but it’s been fucking intense for me too.’

The lift dinged and the doors slowly opened.

I stood there. ‘Are you asking me back to your room?’ I said. ‘Sorry,’ he said. ‘Look, whatever.’

Callum wasn’t even my type. Blue eyes, totally symmetrical features, shaven blond head; he looked like a young Greek god – he *looked* like a Calvin Klein model. Too obvious for me – or just too different from Spencer, with his chipped front tooth and his wonky grin and wide-set eyes, his cartoon-character lankiness and restless energy. I was willing to bet I wasn’t Callum’s type either. I could see myself in the mirrored wall of the lift: messy pink hair, nose ring, too pale, too much eyeliner, dressed in black – in normal circumstances he’d never go for a girl like that, he’d go for classically beautiful girls. Like Anu – he and Anu made a good Hamlet-and-Ophelia. Matty had cast them both, and Matty had been right. Anu’s big, beseeching eyes with those long dark eyelashes, and her black hair that reached to her waist and shone an otherworldly blue in the footlights. I’d watched their dance at the end of Act I scene 2 just once, in the dress rehearsal, and after that, every single time the drums and the first cascading piano notes started, I’d turned away from the backstage monitor.

‘Callum,’ I said. For the strangest moment I felt this weird sense of almost pity for him, and not just for him: for me, for Spence – for all of us. It was nothing you could ever

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have put into words. A sort of sharp, deep, all-encompassing sorrow for this, for everything.

It has to happen sometime, I told myself. So why not now, and why not with him? There was a sort of logic to it, after all.

So we went back to Callum's room and we slept together.

'Is this ok?' he kept asking, and the fucked-up thing was that I couldn't stop thinking about my wedding night. I kept thinking, if you hadn't consummated your marriage, did it mean that you weren't really married? My wedding ring was on a chain around my neck, just some cheap chain from Argos, and I kept thinking that it was going to catch on something and break – the awful symbolism of that.

But I just kept saying, yeah, no, fine, this is nice. And overall it was fine, a bit clumsy maybe, drunken obviously, rushed, but he finished off, and I didn't cry.

There, I told myself – it was done.

Five minutes from now, I'd be back in my own room. The next day – technically that day – was my last in New York: my flight home was that night. I wouldn't have to see Callum again. Well, I'd go to his film at the QFT with Matty and the others, because it would be weird not to, but I wouldn't tell them, of course – how could I? – and the Callum on the screen would have nothing to do with any of this.

But I didn't leave. I don't know why – maybe it was just

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nice to be beside someone in a bed, rather than alone in the taut starched acres of an American hotel double, with rolling news on low for company. Maybe it was something as basic as the warmth of another human – I'd been so cold, most nights, that I'd gone to sleep in woolly socks with my coat draped over me. We smoked Callum's weed vape for a bit and we didn't talk, at least not about anything much, and for that I was grateful. Then we must have fallen asleep, because next thing we were waking and it was daylight outside, we were laughing and wincing at how painfully bright the light was where we hadn't closed the blackout blinds, pulling the duvet over our faces, and Callum's body beside me was so warm, so solid and warm, and my body was responding, and somehow we were having sex again. It was slower this time – more deliberate. But as I showered in his bathroom, using the hotel's shower gel from the wall dispenser rather than his expensive moisturising stuff, I told myself it was just an animal reaction to waking hung-over and naked with someone; that was all.

Callum was starving – I realised I was hungry too. I'd gotten almost used to that dull heavy knot in my stomach, to eating out of duty rather than desire. He'd nothing in his mini-fridge apart from protein shakes, yogurt and aloe vera juice, his coffee machine was out of pods, and I knew there was fuck-all in my kitchenette, so we went out to get caffeine and something to eat. There was a Whole Foods just a few blocks away, he said, so we braved the madness of Times Square, the crossroads of the world, with its huge flashing billboards and its teeming throngs of tourists, its

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hawkers and panhandlers and rickshaws and hotdog stands and churro carts, discount theatre booths and tour guides with megaphones and constant stream of taxi horns, to get a cinnamon babka bun for me and green juice, protein bars and whatever else Callum and his upcoming shoot regime required; and we got takeaway lattes and wandered through Bryant Park to drink them. We stopped for a bit to watch the ice-skaters on the public rink and then we were, Oh God, somehow we were holding hands. Anyone could have seen us. It was entirely plausible that others from the company would wander out hungover to Whole Foods as well, and stop to watch the skating, and see us.

I was Spencer's Ophelia. All of them knew that. At the end, when he couldn't manage to say my name, the turn of it, the 'nyuh', he even called me 'Fee', and for a while most of them had too.

The morning suddenly felt a merciless white. As we stood there, a few scraps of sky sheared themselves off and fell as snowflakes. I tried to focus on the skaters, some in their own white boots, most in grey hire boots with thick black blades, gliding and clomping and stumbling anti-clockwise round, holding hands and grabbing for each other and clutching onto the barriers and yelling; children pushing plastic snowmen, three girls shrieking as they careened around trying to stay arm-in-arm, a young man with long dyed-red curls and silver leggings going backwards too fast, one child in a blue plastic wheelchair, a young woman right in front of us attempting a wobbly arabesque and losing her balance. But all I could think was

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how all of us, each and every single one of us, would have to meet our death alone, whatever and whenever it might be. Every single one of the people on that rink, of the people watching, every one of us. Everyone. It was something you knew, of course, yet at the same time it was utterly impossible.

There was a thing R. D. Laing said that'd been important for our *Hamlet*: about insanity being a perfectly rational response to an insane world. I couldn't work out what was more insane: to live as if you wouldn't die, or to live as if you would.

'What do you want to do now?' Callum said. 'Do you want to go skating?'

'Let's go back,' I said.

So we went back to his room, and this time we weren't drunk, we weren't newly woken and hungover, we were entirely sober, in the daytime, no excuses. This time it didn't have that gauche heat of the first time, or the feeling of waking naked and a bit ashamed. This time it was really good. Afterwards, to my horror, the tears started spilling out of me.

'Oh fuck,' Callum said. 'Ach, Sonya.'

'I'm sorry,' I said, and I tried to pull myself together.

'C'mere to me,' he said, and pulled my head towards his shoulder, and we lay there for a bit. You wanted this, I told myself. You chose this last night, in the lift, and you could have gone back to your room but you didn't, and you chose to come back here today. You *chose* this.

And I thought of how sex with Spence had been good

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not because the sex was particularly good but because he was Spencer, and because of the moments on stage when we felt like two parts of the same person.

Callum had been stroking my arm, and now he was tracing and retracing the words on the inside of my wrist. He didn't need to ask what they were, or what they meant – most of the company had them. We'd gone into town to get them on the day Spence died, the remaining six of us who were the core of our company then, and Spence's mum Kelly, his brother Al, and Al's boyfriend Dee. We'd gone to a tattooist in the Queen's Arcade and afterwards we went to Maggie Mays, then The Spaniard, before piling back in taxis to Kelly's house. Kelly was exactly the sort of mum that you'd want to be – I remembered thinking that, fucked-up as it was to think that in the circumstances. Me and Matty and Ciara and Aoife all fell asleep in Kelly's bed, just sort of huddled together, and she put her duvet over us. The next morning my wrist was sore. It hadn't hurt as much as I'd expected at the time, or maybe that was the adrenaline, but underneath the plastic bandage it felt scraped raw, like sunburn, my skin rising hot and red in protest against the black letters.

'You know,' Callum said, carefully, 'it's mad that I never even knew him. Like – what was he like?'

What was Spencer like? I laughed, despite myself. How were you supposed to put a person like Spence into words?

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We met at the Youth Lyric. We were only fifteen. Even just getting in was a big deal – they put on productions in the main theatre, and there were waiting lists, auditions. Spencer was the person I happened to be paired up with for the very first exercise – you’d to mirror each other’s movements, trying neither to lead nor to follow. We were good at it, right from the start, even when we tried to take the piss with each other. Spence was like that – he’d push something as far as it could go. The Youth Lyric was how we met Matty too, and pretty soon we were a trio; occasionally, when Matty had a new girlfriend, a quartet.

We were a stage couple before we were a couple in real life, and our first kiss was a stage kiss. It was a summer youth production of *A Tale of Two Cities* – I was Lucie Manette to Spencer’s Sydney Carton, and he’d to kiss me after I fainted. The director asked if we were ok with it, suggested we got it out of the way a few times so it wasn’t awkward when we did it for the first time in front of the company. So, in the hallway of a church hall in Stranmillis, we kissed. By the third or fourth time, we were in hysterics, and the director was telling us that it was a chaste and tender token of love, not an attempt at resuscitation. Most nights of the run that summer I had to remind myself on stage that it was my husband Charles I loved, or thought I did, and my tears for Sydney at the end, when he spoke his *far, far better* lines at the foot of the scaffold and I tried to run to him and had to be restrained, always came easily. And it was at the afterparty for that production, in a bedroom heaped with coats in someone’s parents’ house

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off the Antrim Road, tipsy on cider but mainly just high on the play, that we slept together for the first time.

In our A-level year, both of our schools wanted us to apply to Oxbridge. Neither of us had ever been to Oxford or Cambridge, so we chose Cambridge at random, and applied to the same college. To our surprise, we both got in – Spencer for philosophy, me for English. We hadn't been a couple all that time – for a while Spence'd had a thing with another boy in the group and one night I'd even kissed Matty. But things got more serious between us at Cambridge – the culture shock of being at such a posh and English institution, where people seemed to know which way to pass the port and debated the relative merits of Val-d'Isère and Courchevel, could make jokes that relied on a knowledge of Derrida and weren't scundered at having a 'bedder' to tidy your room each day. We were both completely out of our depth, and that made us rely on each other more. It opened a gap up, too, between us and our friends back home, most of whom had stayed, with life going on pretty much the same as it had done, the same friendship groups, the same nights out, the same part-time jobs. Cambridge didn't allow you to work during term-time in case it compromised your studies, but not working wasn't an option for either of us, so we both did shifts in the college bar, and some tutoring for a local sixth-form college. We pulled all-nighters together to meet our essay deadlines, read and proofread each other's dissertations, helped each other revise.

We didn't have time to take part in the student drama

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scene in the way we'd hoped, and Spence, in that way he had of taking against something, couldn't stand the ADC, the theatre at the centre of student drama – he said it was full of entitled pricks. But there was one time that we did act together – I was Estragon to his Vladimir in a production that must have been illegal, because the Beckett estate never lets women play roles in *Godot*. The director just happened to see us going through the sides together outside the audition room and cast us on the spot, because that chemistry of being able to finish each other's sentences, of knowing what the other was going to say before they said it – we just had it.

I don't mean to paint some idealised picture of things. We weren't exactly a couple, even though everyone assumed that we were; but the truth was, it wasn't easy to go on dates with English boys who had no idea how little they knew about where you came from, when all the while you'd Spencer's voice in the back of your head mocking how they spoke and what they said – he could be mean like that, merciless. We fought; bitter, slammed-door fights – sometimes I resented Spencer, how he stopped me from fully committing to college life in the ways that I thought I would have been able to without him. And yet I hated it if he got too close to another girl. He was mine. We were entangled.

Neither of us had any idea what to do after graduating. We toyed with the idea of drama school – though without any notion of how we'd afford it, another three years of study. My parents could maybe have helped me a bit, but that was out of the question for Spence. London was out

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too – some girls in my year were going to find a house together, and said I could share with them, but where would that leave Spence? It seemed a defeat to move home – to find ourselves back where we'd started, with nothing to show for it but a sort of estrangement from the people and place we came from. Then Matty convinced us she had the solution. Her dad was on the board of the Lyric, and was a great patron of the arts. He also owned a couple of houses off the Lisburn Road – and Matty would convince him to let a bunch of us live in one of them for a year, paying just enough rent to cover bills and mortgage, while we tried to make a go of a theatre company. Matty had her dad twisted round her wee finger – he said yes. Me and Spence said, why the hell not?

Our theatre company was Matty, Spence and me, Ciara and Aoife – two sisters Matty had met at Queen's – and two guys we knew from Youth Lyric days, Ethan, who funnily enough had played Charles Darnay all those years ago, and Matty's cousin Ryan. In that first year we made some site-specific work, including a version of 'Station Island', all the ghosts coming forward to speak. Then we took on Heaney's bog-body poems, and our play, *North*, won an award, got us on some lists of ones-to-watch, and an Arts Council development grant. It was with this that we made our *Hamlet*: Matty wanted to do something really big, full-scale, bold, and Spence and I'd had the idea of staging *Hamlet* ever since it was the set text for Part I of my Triplos, and we'd spent hours dissecting and comparing the different Folio and Quarto versions. At first, it was just a

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sort of intellectual game we played – if Hamlet, so reluctant to act, to commit to his destiny, could choose a different course of events, what might it be? But now, *Choose Your Own Hamlet* was born.

It's one thing working out what Shakespearean verse means in an academic context; speaking it clearly enough for an audience to understand is a totally different ballgame. We enlisted our old Youth Lyric tutor and a breathwork coach and it took months – first to learn how to say the lines, then to make them ours. Often we feared we'd taken on too much. But we kept on, and we put everything we had into our *Hamlet*. Sometimes it seemed the product of everything we'd been and done in all the years we'd known each other. It's such an intimate thing, making a piece of art together, and it was making the play that finally made a couple of me and Spence – bonded us, irrevocably.

CYOH opens with the whole cast on stage, and Hamlet walking among them. Then a clock strikes, a solemn, old-fashioned sort of tolling, and the play has begun. In its entirety, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* would take way over four hours to perform. In ours, a version slimmed down as much as we could, the clock is set for three – the minimum time it would take the main action of the play to happen straight through. But it never runs straight: after the end of Act I, where Hamlet chooses to put on his antic disposition, he gets to control what happens next. The play from then on is divided into modules, and Hamlet can replay them, looping scenes, as he seeks a different way through. His farewell to Ophelia, Claudius at prayer, Poor Yorick, for

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instance – each can be repeated, as if each time he might finally notice an escape route that’s eluded him before.

It was a total nightmare to tech – we’d to work out, fractally, all the possible combinations for the lighting rig, for the sound. Nobody knew in advance of a performance which way it was going to go – even Spence claimed he decided on stage, in the moment. And there was a further catch: if he looped an Ophelia scene after Ophelia has died, she – I – would come back soaking wet, hair plastered down my back and gown drenched, as if I really had been summoned from the dead. A Polonius scene looped after the murder behind the arras would have Ryan with blood-stains spreading down his clothes. The words stay the same, because the script cannot change, but you’d find yourself playing the same scene two or three times in a row with an increasing intensity and desperation, especially if you were soaking wet and freezing your tits off, as if you were trying to say to Hamlet through your words, *please let me go*.

One performance, all he did was reloop his farewell to Ophelia, the *eyes that to the last bended their light on me* scene, like the moment in Ovid where Orpheus looks back and loses Eurydice, and by the end of the sixth or seventh time none of us were saying our words to each other, only to him, and we didn’t even stay on our marks, we were gathered round in a semicircle, basically guldering at him. Things like that happened that you could never predict. Every single performance we had audience walk-outs. Punters disgusted at our irreverence towards the Bard, or who thought it was gimmicky, or who were just bored. But it started to get

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something of a cult following too, and you'd see the same people coming back night after night.

We got money to take the production to the Edinburgh Fringe, then to tour it round Ireland. We won a rake of trophies at the Zebbies and the Irish Theatre Awards. But it was at the Irish Theatre Awards that we realised something wasn't right. Spence won Best Actor, and when he got to the podium he couldn't speak. People applauded harder, thinking he was overcome with emotion, but it wasn't that. The words just hadn't come. He'd been having headaches for a few weeks by that point that he'd brushed off, and his temper, always quick to flare, had been worse than usual. A week later, he and Matty and I were at the Royal Victoria getting the news that the scan showed a tumour.

When we had chosen to do that play, that great play of memory and mortality, we couldn't have known what was to come. But I wondered sometimes if, somehow, we did. There are so many amazing moments to our play. But my favourite bit to perform was always our Act I scene 2 dance. Hamlet has just seen his father's ghost, and the air is heavy with all that's to come – *all is not well*, he says, *foul deeds will rise*. Immediately after that scene, as the play-text has it, first Laertes then Polonius condemns Ophelia and ridicules her 'love' for Hamlet. *Contagious blastments are most imminent*, Laertes sneers – it feels horrible to be on the receiving end of that on stage; it's a curse that anyone would buckle

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under. But our production levers open a space between these scenes. Kenneth Branagh made a similar choice in his film of *Hamlet*, putting in a flashback of a love scene. Otherwise, you don't actually see Hamlet and Ophelia together until the get-thee-to-a-nunnery scene – you hear of their courting, their love letters, you hear of him bursting into her room with *doublet all unbrac'd and stockings foul'd, pale-faced and knocking-kneed*, but you see nothing of them as lovers.

For our dance, the song we chose was the song we thought of in real life as 'our' song – Shane MacGowan singing 'Summer in Siam'. For us that song was punting up the river on the day the very last papers of our Finals were done, in hysterics because Spence was fucking terrible at it and kept on going in circles and almost losing the pole, then lying in Grantchester Meadows under a weeping willow, drinking gin and tonic out of tins; watching a kingfisher darting back and forth, electric blue, that song on repeat on my phone, the lazy swelling saxophone. Later that day we stripped and swam in the river in our underwear, lay drying off in the sun. Funny that the afternoon we always came back to was so bucolic and English. But that was part of it too. All that had often been complicated between us suddenly felt so simple. It felt like we'd made it through. It felt like we were on the verge of everything.

Our production plays the song in its entirety, all four minutes eight seconds, from the first drum brushes and cascading piano to the barely perceptible plink of the very last note. Four minutes eight seconds is a long time in stage

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time – every night it felt far too long and then a sort of magic happened and you started to feel as if you were transcending time, then you were moving in a sort of time out of time, time borrowed from all that was to come, even as you knew that the cost of repaying it would be unbearable. It was the moment the production came alive – you could feel an audience feel it. After our dance, you knew that Laertes and Polonius were wrong. You knew that Hamlet was right in looping and replaying and desperately seeking a way out of all that lies ahead. In some productions we'd read about, like the 1989 RSC one that starred Mark Rylance, Hamlet violently attacks Ophelia: screams at her, grabs her hair, shoves her to the ground and forces himself on top of her, spits on her and leaves her crying. But ours – our *Hamlet* is a love story.

They'd said that, with the right treatment, Spencer would have a few years. He had three months.

The week before he died, he asked me to marry him. He was in the hospice by then. I'd never have believed I had it in me to nurse someone through a terminal illness. I'd always hated the sight of blood. If I held back someone's hair as they boked, I was guaranteed to start boking too. But somehow I'd done it – been with Spence through everything.

I was reading to him when he asked me – interrupting me mid-soliloquy. At first, I thought he was quoting

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something. We'd done that, run lines with each other, key scenes from plays, in waiting rooms and hospital beds, in the hope it would keep his synapses firing, until the part of his brain that dealt with text and memory was just too banjaxed. I was reading from Jean Anouilh's *Antigone* in Lewis Galantière's translation at the time, which is probably my favourite play ever – we'd stolen the opening of it for *CYOH*, that beautiful moment of stillness before the action, the helplessness of knowing you have to play your part right to the end. I tried to think what character he was being, what my response should be. But he was actually asking.

For one horrible moment, I wanted to say no. I didn't want to be a widow. The phrase flashed through my mind, 'widow's weeds', and I thought of Ophelia drowning, pondweed clutching at her ankles – in several productions she's actually murdered by soldiers at Gertrude's behest, held underwater while Gertrude watches – and I thought in a tumbled, desperate way of that line about Gertrude and Claudius, *the funeral baked meats coldly furnishing the marriage tables* – it would be the other way around, our wedding would be a prelude to a funeral – it was wrong, all wrong, a grotesque parody of all that should have been—

But with my next breath that sullyng, panicked shame resolved into something steadier. This was Spencer – my Sydney Carton, my Vladimir; my lord, my true love, sweet prince – this was my Spence. And this wasn't what I'd ever imagined, but it was what we had.

So Ciara and Aoife dyed my faded hair bright pink

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again, and my mum bought me a dress, and Kelly bought us rings, and the hospice nurses arranged everything official – they were amazing. And on the day itself Matty and Ethan and Ryan did the room, and it was fucking beautiful; of course it was, we were a theatre company. There were fairy lights everywhere, and garlands of jasmine, and armfuls of flowers – it looked like the Forest of Arden, it looked like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. And we said the words, those *holy vows of heaven*, and we signed the book, Matty and Al our witnesses, and we were married.

That night everyone left us – Kelly, Al, Spence and Al's da, my mum, Matty, everyone who'd been taking turns to be there. There were fold-out chair-beds beside Spence's hospital bed, where you could stay the night, and the nurses would make them up with sheets for you, and blankets knitted by volunteers. But I climbed up into Spence's bed, sliding myself between his body and the guard rail as gently as I could, spooning him from behind, and we listened to music on my phone, nothing in particular, just what randomly played. Spence slept. My phone ran out of battery. When I closed my eyes I could almost kid myself that we were in my narrow single bed at Cambridge, or Spence's teenage bed. I lay there thinking how strange it was that, for all the choices we'd made, life had brought us here, to this moment. Everything sort of overlapped – as if everything in life would have brought us to this moment in the end. Samuel Johnson famously said that Shakespeare seems to write without any moral purpose, but it had always seemed to me and Spence that

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there was a great moral depth to *Hamlet* – that sense, in the end, that there is a design in everything far beyond our comprehension. Weird to say, but there was a deep and abiding calm in the room that night. I think you could live a dozen lifetimes without being blessed enough to know peace like it.

The next morning, when everyone came back, we ate croissants and grapes and drank orange juice round Spence's bed. His da told the story of Spencer's tenth birthday, when he'd driven Spence and three of his mates to the McDonald's Drive-Thru but on the way they'd pulled in and done handbrake turns round the back of Avoniel – Spence'd always said it was his best birthday ever. Then Kelly told stories – of when she'd wee baby Spence in a sling going for a walk in the park, how when she bathed him that night there were flakes and flakes of croissant caught in the fat folds of his neck, because of the way he used to have his head right back, looking up at her. Another time she'd been eating a Magnum and had touched it to his lips for a laugh, and he'd stuck out a chubby wee fist and seized it off of her and taken a bite, the cheeky wee bollix, she said. He wasn't eating anything now – just the chips of ice we gave him. The grapes were only Tesco's, but they were so dark and so intensely sweet I chewed one to a pulp and kissed Spence, parting my lips so he could have the taste in his mouth too, and his face, his beautiful, scarred, stapled, fuzzy head, lifted from the pillows for a moment in sheer bliss. Fuck, I loved him then. I loved him so much I thought I would burst.

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But the nurse came in then because we were being too noisy, and said maybe we should let him rest, and everyone but me and Kelly went. I fell asleep in my chair and Kelly dozed off too. We woke in the afternoon, to the sound of heavy rain, but Spencer never woke again, just breathed and stopped breathing, and breathed again and stopped breathing, and took longer to breathe again each time, and after a while his face was damp as if with effort and there was an effortful rattle in his throat too. He didn't seem in pain, exactly, but you could tell the toll it was taking on him, the concentration it was taking to remain alive – or maybe to die. By then Kelly had phoned Al and their da, and they'd both come back, and the four of us were all there all night, saying to him all the things you'd think were clichés, really, until you find yourself in that scene. And by morning he was gone: as if, we kept on saying to each other, classic Spencer, pure stubborn, wilful Spence, he'd stolen a march on Hamlet's *fell sergeant, death* – as if he'd just decided to go.

Good night sweet prince.

Callum was still running his fingertips over those words inked into my wrist.

'Spencer was larger than life,' I said.

It was a silly thing to say – none of us is, not one of the spiralling, unstable bundles of atoms that we think of as 'us', fleetingly brought together as they are by forces beyond our comprehension or control.

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I took my wrist back from Callum – squeezed it as hard as I could. Squeezed my eyes shut against another hot rush of tears.

‘Ach, here,’ he said. ‘I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything.’

‘It isn’t that,’ I said. ‘It’s just—’

I couldn’t keep the stupid tears in. The first emails about potentially taking the play to New York the following year, for a short run showcasing new Irish drama, had come through just after he’d been admitted to the hospice, and he’d said, Of course you fucking have to, don’t be a fucking eejit, do it for me. And now it was a whole year and a half later, and it was done.

If it be now, ’tis not to come, Hamlet says to Horatio as he goes to what he knows is his death – his destiny. Spence had rarely let the play get that far. The couple of times he did, he played it as if he could not accept it, and was trying to convince himself that he must. But last night, Callum had said the words with determination and yet a wistfulness to them, the surrender of a fate accepted. *If it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come*. That was true. It was coming for all of us. And I wished I could believe I’d see Spence again, but I didn’t believe in that, in Heaven, some undiscovered country lying beyond.

I’d never played Ophelia as mad, just out of her mind with grief. There must have been a relief for her, I thought now,

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in giving yourself over to it – just letting go. I finished crying my heart out, and concentrated on taking slow, deep breaths; on the moment one breath became another. For a while, we lay there, side by side, breathing together. I closed my eyes.

When I woke, it was dark outside, and Callum was asleep, one arm flung over his head. Trying not to disturb him, I reached out as carefully as I could and checked my phone: it was almost four. I hadn't packed, and I'd have to leave soon for the airport. I hadn't even checked in yet for my flight. But I lay there a bit longer. It was snowing outside – wave after wave of snow. The way the orange and pink and blue of the billboards opposite was flickering through – it was mesmerising.

After a bit, Callum stirred.

'Hey you,' he said.

'Hey,' I said.

'Jeez, what time is it?'

He switched on his bedside lamp. The room clicked back into place, objects reassembling, snapping to attention. It was half past four now – I'd really have to get a move on. I connected to the wi-fi, and the messages came tumbling in – several on the company WhatsApp group, two checking in on me from Matty. One from my mum, who was careful not to text me too often; one from Kelly, who texted every day.

'Everything ok?' said Callum.

'Yeah,' I said automatically. Then I said, 'Here. Callum. I'm sorry for all that, earlier.'

'Don't be saying you're sorry,' he said. 'It's totally

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understandable, like. This whole play has been such a head-melt.'

We were both silent for a moment. He was right, I thought. I was glad it was done. But I was glad, too, that I'd seen it through. And glad he'd done what he did with the closing show last night.

'Right,' I said. 'I need to check in.'

'Here, Sonya – why don't you stay for a bit? Just change your flight – have a few days in New York.'

'Are you being serious?'

I thought of the red-eye, remorselessly crossing the Atlantic; of the dingy morning light in the chaotic Arrivals hall at Dublin Airport. The Aircoach back up north, and trudging down Glengall Street to the bus stop, and the bus up the Lisburn Road. Back to an empty house, unslept-in slept-in sheets, inevitably milk gone off in the fridge. How low the sky always seemed when you got back from somewhere; how it pressed in on you.

'Look, fuck it,' said Callum, 'you could even come to Palm Springs, why not?'

I laughed. 'And watch you work out?'

To his credit, he blushed.

'I just meant,' he said, 'it's been nice hanging out with you. Why don't you?'

But they weren't going to want me in Palm Springs, or on his press junket. They didn't want their rising star to have some random girl from back home in tow – a twenty-five-year-old widow who wasn't even his girlfriend, who wasn't even sure that she wanted to be with anyone

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again, or at least not yet. They'd want him to be young and single at parties, or pictured with some up-and-coming actress in the gossip magazines, I don't know, however those things worked.

'Callum,' I said.

I wanted to tell him how much part of me would love to. Callum was sound. He was a genuinely decent guy and we'd clicked, physically, we had. It had been unfair of me to dismiss him as not my type: I'd been thinking of how much Spencer had taken the piss out of jocks, or the sort of boy-band boys who mostly got the leading-man parts. Spencer would have been so bemused at the thought of me with someone like Callum. But Spencer wasn't here any more, and I could go to Palm Springs with Callum if I wanted to.

Fuck it: I could.

'You're not going to, are you?' said Callum.

'I can't,' I said.

There was a fatal flaw in our version of *Hamlet*. The thing about the CYOA books was that they rewarded action: if, at the start of the book, you decided to stay where you were, in the cabin, in the submarine, on the sea-ledge, you very quickly died. Inaction was punished. Your only hope was to push on through – to seize the narrative, even when you knew that it was stacked against you in the short term, and essentially hopeless in the end. That was the opposite of what our play did. But it was done now and I couldn't

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keep drifting – carried along in other people’s slipstreams.
With sorrow I embrace my fortune. I had to move out of
Matty’s dad’s house, and find new plays to make, or I had to
do something else entirely.