

Shakespeare literally comes alive. Liam knows Shakespeare. All of Shakespeare. Every word of every play. No one knows how or why. But tell him a line, and he'll go into a trance and perform the whole play brilliantly.

We All Are Shakespeare

By Richard Seltzer

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RICHARD SELTZER

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Chapter One — Something, Somewhere, Somehow

June 26, 2021, Eastport, CT

Eastport was the pretty how town where anyone lived. It was too far from New York City for commuting, but close enough so you could go there for a show or an event if you wanted. It was big enough so it had everything you were likely to need, and small enough so you could recognize the couple you passed on the sidewalk or saw on the green or at the beach. Most people who lived there were born there, and expected to be buried there, unless a cure for death was found, and in that case, they'd choose to live there forever.

The town was on a peninsula that stuck out into Long Island Sound. The interstate and the train passed it by, fifteen miles to the north — close enough so you could go to other places easily if and when you wanted to, but far enough away so rest stops and businesses that catered to travelers had no reason to invade the town and make it like highway towns all across the country.

There was a mall near the interstate. But most folks found it more convenient to shop in town, and they preferred to see and touch rather than shop online.

The main road wound back on itself, starting and ending at the green and following the twisting shoreline. The cross streets were one-way or dead ends in a pattern that seemed natural to the natives, but was indecipherable to outsiders, forcing them to slow down or stop to ask for directions.

The boardwalk, which extended for three miles along the beach, was just for walking, with no shops and no food stands, except for vendor vans parked nearby.

Scheduled events brought residents together. Most popular were the Oyster Festival, the Garden Home Tour, the Historical Home Tour, and the twice-yearly Music on the Porch, for which dozens of families hired bands to play outdoors at their homes, inviting neighbors to gather on the lawn and enjoy the music. In addition, for the summer months, there were weekly band concerts in the Gazebo on the town green and at the Pavilion near the town beach.

The Rotary Club printed a town calendar every year where you could list your anniversary and the birthdates of everyone in your family for a dollar each, so your friends and neighbors would know and could join in your celebration.

The downtown movie theater had one show every Saturday night. People went mainly to see one another, rather than the movie, which they could have watched streaming at home.

The pandemic had disrupted everything. But now, in June of 2021, the pandemic was finally over, so everything could return to normal.

No one imagined what would happen next. How could outdoor performances of Shakespeare plays be anything other than up-lifting? How could they turn this quiet town into a media mecca, overrun and vandalized by outsiders?

In particular, Debbie Dawkins would never have guessed that anything associated with Shakespeare could go wrong. She knew the works of Shakespeare better than anyone else in Eastport, having directed two productions per year for four years at the local high school. She had missed this last year and the spring of the year before due to the pandemic, when in-person teaching was curtailed, but she was looking forward to returning to that schedule in the fall.

She had gotten close to the students who acted in her productions. They were an extension of her family. She missed the social bond as well as the discipline of preparation, and the sense of accomplishment. In the past, she had begun each academic year with actors who knew her and

knew one another from the previous year's productions. But this fall's seniors were sophomores when last she saw them. And none of them had had a major role in any production of hers. There wouldn't be the usual core of experienced and dedicated players to build on. She hoped to make up for that this summer by staging Shakespeare at the town's beach Pavilion. She had permission to use the Pavilion any afternoon she liked. She had zero budget. No entry fees and no donations were part of her deal with the town. If the program drew a crowd, and if she wanted to do it again, she could negotiate better terms next summer.

She contacted all the students who had shown interest in drama in the past. But having been couped up at home for the school year, they were all itching to be free. She soon realized that she couldn't generate the enthusiasm and discipline necessary to get a group of unpaid teenagers to learn their lines and show up for rehearsals and performances during their summer vacation. So, she scaled back her plans. She would do weekly readings rather than one full-scale production. That meant there would be no need for sets or costumes, and no need for rehearsals. She would assign the parts at the last minute among those who showed up. And, if necessary, she would read some of the minor parts herself. The audiences would be small at first, but she thought interest would build over time, catching the attention of nearby beachgoers. Seeking both readers and audience, she posted notices on telephone poles, in store windows, and in the online edition of the local newspaper.

No one showed up.

She and her best friend Gwen, who she had known since kindergarten and who now taught Physics at the high school, sat on folding chairs on the stage in the Pavilion and waited for half an hour beyond the planned starting time. Then they started reading out loud to an audience of none.

Debbie began,

*"Two households, both alike in dignity,
In fair Verona, where we lay our scene,*

*From ancient grudge break to new mutiny,
Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean."*

A car pulling into the parking lot suddenly screeched to a halt. A young man jumped out, ran to the Pavilion, and continued the speech.

*"From forth the fatal loins of these two foes
A pair of star-crossed lovers take their life..."*

After he delivered that speech, he reversed his position on the stage and delivered the next, and then the next and the next.

Debbie and Gwen picked up their chairs and moved out of his way, sitting where the audience was supposed to have sat. They watched in awe.

Debbie was struck by the emotional force of this stranger's performance. She felt compelled to watch and listen. Never once did she exchange glances with Gwen or whisper to Gwen or did Gwen whisper to her. This was otherworldly, enthralling, unlike anything she had ever experienced.

He spoke and acted the entire play, flawlessly and dramatically. His swarthy skin, his slim but muscular build, his jutting jaw, his sharp chin, and his dark penetrating eyes reminded Debbie of Johnny Depp as Captain Jack Sparrow in *Pirates of the Caribbean*.

When he finished, he wandered off, as if in a trance, to the boardwalk, where he stood, leaning over the railing, looking out at the Sound.

"What just happened?" Debbie asked Gwen.

"Wow," was all Gwen could say.

"I didn't dream that?" Debbie asked. "It really happened?"

"Yes. And I think I know the guy and that you do too."

"Who is he?"

"I think he's Liam O'Laughlin. He was a senior four, maybe five years ago. Maybe your first year teaching. I had him for Physics. You probably had him for English."

"You remember all your students?"

"No. But I remember him. He was the only new kid in the class, the only outsider. I don't remember seeing him since."

"Liam? Yes, it could be Liam. He was skinny, short, quiet, kept to himself. He must have grown some and put on some weight. I remember him now, sitting by himself at the back of the room. He kept staring out the window. He didn't seem to have friends, at least not in my class."

"That's the one."

Debbie walked over to the boardwalk. As she approached him, she realized that he was shaking and sweating. His broken, confused look triggered a maternal response in her. She wanted to put her arms around him, to hug and comfort him. But she restrained herself.

"Liam?"

"Yeah."

"I'm Ms. Dawkins."

"Yeah. I know."

"What just happened?"

"That I don't know."

"You mean you don't remember?"

"I remember what I did, but I don't know why or how I did it. I started saying words that weren't my words. Lots and lots of words that I didn't think and didn't understand. And I couldn't stop doing it."

"Do you know where you live and how to get there?"

"Of course I know that. Do you think I'm some kind of nutcase?"

"Well, you seem a bit woozy." She hesitated. It occurred to her that he might be able to do what he had just done, again and again, in front of audiences. What a show that would be. "That was a great performance you just put on," she continued. "You must be quite a Shakespeare buff. Did you play in *Romeo and Juliet* in high school before you came to Eastport? Or in college?"

"No. I never acted anywhere, anytime."

"Then you must have watched movies of it, must have read it many times."

"No," he insisted. "I saw your production, back when I was in high school here. And I saw a movie of it once."

"The Zeffirelli?"

"Don't know which movie. Don't remember much about it. It was okay, I guess. Never read the play. I'm sure of that."

"Then how did you do that?"

"I don't have a clue."

"How could you recite and act a complete play that you never studied?"

"Honestly, I don't know."

Debbie stared in disbelief. Was he lying? Why should he lie? That made no sense. But what a showman and what a show. Something extraordinary had just happened, and the producer/director in her needed to seize this opportunity. "Could you do that again?"

"I didn't do it. That wasn't me. That was none of my doing. I was as much a witness to it as you were. I heard me. I saw me. But I didn't make it happen, and I couldn't stop it. I have no idea how it could have happened. I heard myself say the lines, like somebody else was saying them. I felt my muscles move as I went back and forth across the stage. But I wasn't doing it. I don't know who or what was. Weird. Never felt anything like that. Never heard of anything like that. It was like something out of *The Twilight Zone*."

Debbie was of two minds. Here was a helpless kid shocked by something unexplainable that had happened to him, like the victim of a car wreck. And here was an amazing performer, a theatrical genius.

"Where did you disappear to after your senior year?" she asked. "I don't think I've seen you since, and, in a town this small, everyone's always bumping into everyone else."

"Mom died. Cancer. Slow. That whole year she was dying. Then we moved back to Maryland. I went to UConn. I just graduated and moved back here, alone. I've seen you around, seen some others, too, who I knew before, but I haven't gotten around to saying *hello*. *Hello* is tough for me. I don't make friends easy. Live alone. Don't need to talk to anyone except at work."

"Where do you work?"

"Fix computers at Hanson's."

"And Shakespeare?"

"Never could make heads or tails of him in high school. Was lucky to pass the tests on him. And never read *Romeo and Juliet*. Never. It wasn't assigned, and why would I read it if I didn't have to?"

She stared at him in disbelief. He looked away, as if feeling guilty, ashamed that he had done something wrong.

On impulse — another maternal urge — she took his hand and led him to the beach, to an empty stretch of dry sand, above the highwater mark, in the midst of sunbathers. She sat down and tugged his arm for him to do likewise. Then she stretched out, and he stretched out beside her.

Gwen ran up and asked Debbie, "Are you okay?"

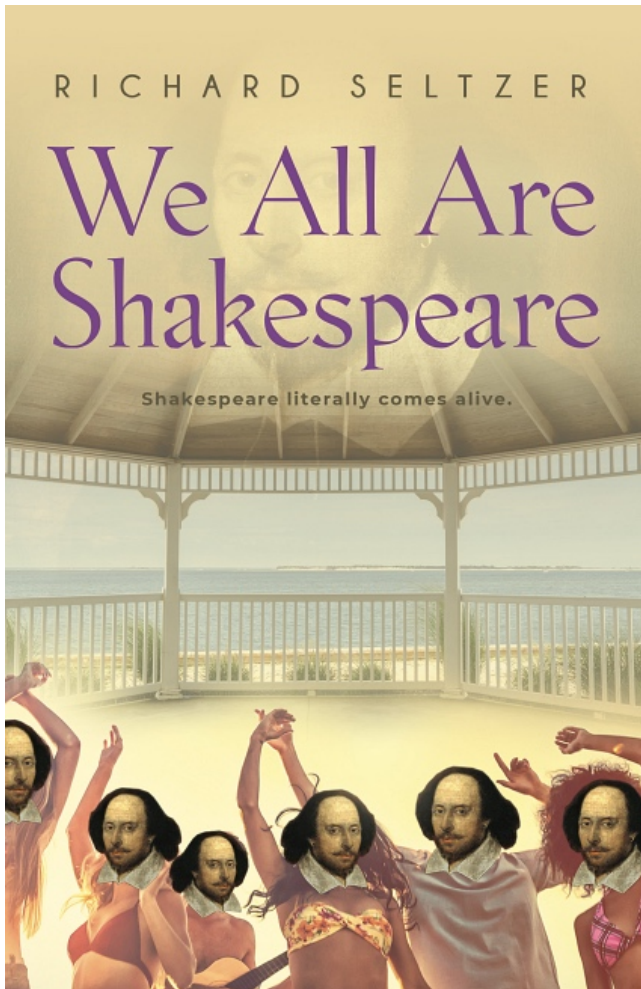
"I just need some quiet time to sort things out. I need to clear my head, like you always say. Your meditation thing. Go on home. I'll call you later."

Debbie was still holding Liam's hand. Why? He was a stranger. He was confused, vulnerable. She was being protective, comforting. But also, his hand made what had just happened tactile, part of the natural world. And it kept him here at her side. She didn't want him to vanish, not before she'd had a chance to figure out what she could and should do next.

She replayed, in her mind, snippets of his impossible performance, imagining live audiences, bigger and bigger audiences, then online,

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streaming video, reaching the whole world, bringing Shakespeare to life on a grand scale. Unforgettable.



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