The Laments

George Hagen

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Unnamed

Perhaps the Lament baby knew that his parents couldn't name him. Moments after birth he displayed a cryptic smile, an ear-to-ear gape at the fuss displayed over his hospital crib as relatives argued over his Christian name. His mother, Julia Lament, particularly felt the burden. A child's name is his portal to the world. It had to be *right*.

"If people were named at the end of their lives, we wouldn't have mistakes like selfish children named Charity, and timid ones named Leo!" she declared.

Julia's namesake was a monstrous chieftain of a great-grandfather named Julius, a surly copper magnate of Johannesburg, South Africa, married three times, arrested for slowly poisoning his last wife through nightly glasses of milk dosed with arsenic. Even after his incarceration, the Clare family insisted on naming their children after him in a desperate attempt to win his favor and thereby keep the copper mines in the family. Hence: four Julias, two Juliuses, a couple of Julians, several Juliannas, and a particularly nasty lapdog named Ju Ju.

Spitefully, Uncle Julius left his fortune to a nurse in the prison hospital. Her name was Ida Wicks, and she was neither compassionate nor attentive; in fact, she belittled her patients' maladies in contrast to her own, which included poor circulation, migraines, lumbago, shingles, bunions, and tinnitus. Nevertheless, Uncle Julius appreciated seeing a woman every morning during his last days on earth, and Nurse Wicks survived her ills long enough to spend his money—a task that kept her cold heart beating a few hours beyond her one hundredth birthday.

Howard Lament, loving husband to Julia and father to the nameless baby, felt a sense of urgency about giving the child a name, even if it was the wrong one. An efficient man, with a broad forehead, a waxen droop of a nose, and a swath of copper hair that curled into a question mark between his temples, Howard abhorred indecision.

"I'll give him *my* name—that'll do," he said. "After all, it's tradition!"

Julia had never been a strong voice for tradition. She had learned a thing or two from Uncle Julius, not to mention having been brought up in the dusty tradition of the girls' boarding school.

"Tradition." She sniffed. "What has tradition ever done for anybody?"

"Oh," sighed her husband, "darling, please don't go on about that school again."

Abbey Gate School for Girls was a Gothic eyesore of immense timbers, roofed with gray slate and thick, bulbous chimneys. The absurdly slender windows seemed designed primarily for defense, a hint of the architect's conviction that modern girls needed to be protected from all manner of assault. Guided by sparse incandescent lighting down dark-paneled corridors, the girls walked in single file with silent footsteps. Learning at Abbey Gate was a regrettable chore requiring swift, accurate replies and a minimum of opinion.

Julia, helplessly opinionated and impulsive, did not fit in. Her raven-blue hair was a tangled mesh that fought the comb and brush, and, when braided, never hung properly like the other girls'. Though her peers took notes with unquestioning faith, Julia granted no teacher that privilege. Not a lesson passed in which her hand didn't rise in challenge, flicking her braid back and forth like a cat's subversive tail.

Julia's nemesis was the head of classics at Abbey Gate. Mrs. Urquhart had the face of a spinster—a myopic squint, thin, ungenerous lips, and copious facial hair. Nevertheless, her

husband could be found sleeping at all the important school functions. He was a taxidermist with thickly whorled spectacles and a waist that began at his armpits.

Mrs. Urquhart taught Shakespeare as a series of morality lessons—chiefly about the institution of marriage. "*Girills,*" she screeched in her Glaswegian burr, "*girills,* Lady Macbeth drove her husband to a bloodthirsty end, proving, *once again,* that the criticisms of a wife are best kept to herself lest her husband take them to heart and slaughter his way to the throne. . . ."

In a flash, the hand of Miss Julia Clare would shoot up, entwined by the recalcitrant braid, intent on an urgent and passionate rebuttal. The scholarly badger, who hated contradiction and despised the Socratic method, would cast a blind eye to the twitching braid until her pupil's gasps became too insistent to ignore.

"What *is* it, Miss Clare?"

"Perhaps, Mrs. Urquhart, Lady Macbeth was simply *fed up* with listening to her husband complain about his station in life!"

"I cannae hear yuh, Miss Clare, speak louder next time." Mrs. Urquhart smiled, as if that settled the matter.

"Consider Macbeth, Mrs. Urquhart," the girl persisted. "No backbone, no confidence, believing a gaggle of old biddies stirring a cauldron. I mean, what a *dope of a Scotsman*!"

A hush of delight spread across the classroom as the girls watched their mentoress blanch; not one day passed that she didn't wear the official green-and-black tartan of the Urquharts (didn't she play the bagpipes for the school as a special treat on Robert Burns's birthday?). Her great badgerly whiskers rose in outrage; she removed her misty tortoiseshell glasses and drew up her massive Caledonian breast.

"Ere yuh *presuming* to divine Shakespeare's truh intention, four hundred years after his death, Miss Clare?"

Even as she trembled before this woman, there was in Julia

Clare a stubborn refusal to be intimidated by anyone. Softly, she replied, "No more than you are, Mrs. Urquhart."

Now the gnarled, nicotine-stained fingers of her teacher, clutching a yellowed and crusty handkerchief, stabbed the air in the direction of the door.

"Get *oot* of mah class!"

"With pleasure, Mrs. Urquhart."

Julia Clare took the familiar route to the Office of the Headmistress, sitting in penitence on a hard oaken bench in the foyer—punishment far worse, in fact, than any time spent *with* the headmistress. Mrs. Grace Bunsen, a woman unrelated to the inventor of the famous burner yet possessed of a bright flame of hair (the color of Double Gloucester cheese, curiously similar to the hair of Julia's future husband), by virtue of her mercy reinforced Julia's belief that a Christian name is a window into one's character.

Said Grace, "Julia, *when* will you realize that some opinions, however inspired, are best kept to yourself?"

"Forgive me, Mrs. Bunsen, but *every* word out of Mrs. Urquhart's mouth is insulting to women!"

With a dignified frown, Grace Bunsen would ask for the particulars—which produced considerable mirth when she conveyed them to the faculty. Julia was unaware of her fame in the teachers' lounge; its shabby armchairs and unemptied ashtrays were the hub for Julia stories while Mrs. Urquhart nursed one of her pungent Malayan cigars beneath a cedar tree on the school grounds, spitting tobacco-stained saliva at the squirrels.

"*But what shall we name our son?*" asked Howard as Julia stared at the ceiling from her hospital bed.

"I'm busy thinking," replied Julia, though she was really thinking of Beatrice. Parenthood has, as one of its side effects, the quality of recasting all childhood experience.

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It was Mrs. Urquhart's butchery of Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing* that finally dissolved Julia's veil of respect. Beatrice was Julia's favorite character, sharp-spoken, skeptical of love, but, when stoked, possessed of a fiery passion; most of all Julia loved Beatrice's tongue, for she was a character armed with quick and witty retorts, a woman who *always* knew what to say.

It wasn't as though Mrs. Bunsen hadn't warned Julia ahead of time.

"Julia, you're certainly entitled to disagree with her, but do try to express it without insulting her heritage."

"She provokes me!"

"She's your teacher, Julia. Further arguments could lead to your expulsion."

The last thing Julia wanted was to disturb the volatile relationship between her parents. Her father, Adam Clare, a bureaucrat at the Electricity Supply Commission in Johannesburg, had never made enough money to please his wife, and couldn't wait for the weekends to go hunting or fishing. Her mother, aptly named Rose, was strikingly beautiful, prickly to the touch, a woman who had criticism for everyone, especially her daughter. The only thing worse than the disharmony at home was the prospect of being sent home to be the source of it.

In the next month, Julia behaved herself while Mrs. Urquhart blamed Desdemona for Othello's bad end and Juliet for tempting Romeo. Julia, to her credit, resisted the thrashing Mrs. Urquhart gave her beloved Beatrice until almost the very end. She remembered the warnings of her headmistress, and perhaps in the disapproval of Mrs. Urquhart she heard a more primal voice, the voice of Rose, who found her daughter's presence so unsatisfactory that she had bundled her off to boarding school at the age of seven. The classics teacher observed her young foe's reticence—hands buried under her knees, mouth zipped shut—so when it seemed clear that her gadfly wouldn't

sting, she ended her lecture with this final remark: "You'll notice how often Beatrice seeks the last word in any scene—clearly an *insecure* and *weak* young woman."

A weak woman? Beatrice?

The girls turned for the volley. Julia wiped the beads of sweat along her upper lip—another quality her mother disliked. "She's assuredly *your* child, Adam. See how she sweats from the most masculine parts of her body!"

Mrs. Urquhart folded her arms—gauntlet dropped. Waiting. Julia bit her lip so hard she could feel the blood on her tongue; her mind was fixed on Mrs. Bunsen's warning. Still, the faces of the girls were trained on her while the hirsute harpy gloated in triumph.

Julia then, without realizing it, fixed one eye on the puckered face of her teacher and raised a skeptical eyebrow.

"Madam, if what you say about Shakespeare reflects life, then all men are the dupes of women, and all women are the mistresses of their destruction. What would *Mr. Urquhart* say to *that,* I wonder?"

Heads were lowered to desks, as if to avoid the return fire from this verbal torpedo.

Mrs. Urquhart squinted, regarding the mock innocence of her assailant with a bobbing craw.

"Miss Clare—you'll *nae* sit in my class *e'er* again!" she sputtered.

Julia was found by her father at the train station, in her uniform, a blue-and-gray tartan, a wide straw hat, and white kneesocks. Perched on a large trunk, she cradled her dog-eared copy of *Lambs' Tales from Shakespeare*.

"Well, missy," he said. "What a mess we're in now."

He was a striking man, tall, with blue-black hair cropped short, thick eyebrows, and strong cheekbones. She liked to imagine a more savage version of him slaughtering Hadrian's legions in the heather.

"I'm so sorry, Papa," she replied.

He deflected her apology with a soft shrug.

"How's Mummy? Tell me all the news. Do I look taller?"

Her father hesitated.

"Yes, missy, I think you might be as tall as your mother."

"You must measure us together. Where is she?"

Adam Clare dug into his jacket pockets, nervously looking for his pipe, then, sighing, he dropped his shoulders and looked at Julia with an abashed smile.

"The thing is, missy, your mother and I are divorced."

The sun broke through the fever trees, and Julia tried to shield the harsh light from her eyes with both hands.

"What?" she said, hoping she had misheard, and yet knowing she hadn't.

"Our marriage is over."

"When?"

"Oh, last Christmas, actually." Her father swallowed. "We were going to tell you this next summer, I suppose, but . . . well, here you are."

Here she was. A loose end to the marriage. An attached string somebody had forgotten to clip.

"What will I do?" she asked.

"Well, luckily they've accepted you at Saint Mary's." He smiled. "You'll continue your studies, grow up, and have a wonderful life."

Julia was sure that Beatrice would have summoned the right riposte, but she couldn't imagine what it was. By the time her outrage found words, her father was busy negotiating with a porter for the shipment of her trunk to the new school. Then he offered her an ice cream and Julia heard herself thanking him for the treat through hot tears.

"It just doesn't seem right to name a child after oneself," Julia told Howard as she looked at her new baby boy, "when he may not feel kindly toward you later in life."

"What could he possibly have against me? I'm certainly not going to make *my* father's mistakes." Howard laughed.

Julia didn't answer. She recalled her parents making only one mistake—marrying each other.

Though the Lament baby's eyes were closed, the power of his smile was astounding. If ever a child possessed a confident spirit, this one excelled in that regard. No parent could doubt that this baby, in spite of his lack of a name, was destined for a happy life.