

OVERTURE

EVERYBODY LOOKS BETTER SINGING, ESPECIALLY FIFTEEN-year-olds.

The same dutiful adults turn up at all these high school musicals. I'm early tonight. Claiming two front-row seats, I spread my sogged overcoat. This toasty auditorium smells of industrial floor wax. Student adolescence keeps walls infused with a sebaceous sweetness akin to curry.

Tonight's three-hour *Sweeney Todd* will star my teenage godson. Well, no. He'll actually play Pie Customer #1. But the boy is pre-med. We don't *want* a future actor. We want one mighty well-rounded college application.

This freezing November evening, the rain-ponchos crinkling indoors look doused, not attractive. Kids onstage grow annually more slim and gifted. In their fringe and songs, how lithe each one. Why does such zest make us, their adult sponsorship, look ever more bushed? Just once I'd like some glamour out here among the grown-ups smelling tonight of wet wool.

Teen ushers seat older arrivals. I have time to consider random irks, stray hopes. Twelve days and nine hours back, I FedExed north my Civil War novel. Spent seven years writing it; the War took only four. While my New York agent is either reading it or continues her partying, I've finally fertilized my houseplants. I sent a candy-gram to my favorite ailing aunt before recalling her diabetes.

So I feel grateful doing godfatherly duty here. I never miss his science presentations, soccer games. Pie Customer's divorced father lives

six states away. I get to be the stand-in. Afterward I feel more civic, butch, opaque. Look, I've brought our boy these nice red tulips, just a wee bit frostbitten.

Umbrellas collapse. Theatre-lovers shuffle in bragging of all they've done to get here. Our supposedly high-end River Road, it always floods first. Damp cars outside will mostly show you faded Democratic election-stickers two administrations old. In here we'll prove liberal in toe-tapping through this season's "People Who Need People." Come intermission, we will grin, nod, chat. Condemning worsening local traffic and George W. Bush's latest pointless foreign war. Mostly we'll stand around praising each other's kids. *Truly*. Has there ever been a bunch more gifted?

Good crowd tonight, considering predicted sleet. Old folks keep teetering in. They need walkers just since last year's *Carousel*. They've been coming to these musicals since their own kids, now retired to Florida, belted out 1961's "Steam Heat."

I keep scanning for my dear friend Jemma, mother to my brilliant godson. Keep checking the time, awaiting my agent's verdict, half-thinking it'll be announced onstage. Took me years to just research the war epic. My house still resembles general headquarters: wall-sized battle maps, victims' daguerreotypes, one dented bugle. What future subject will ever stir me so? I've gladly fetched up here instead of waiting near my landline. Anyway, it's after NY office-hours. Thank God for friends and their dazzling kids, the sweet stir others make. Still, I need another project.

Here's Jemma, childhood pal, first-reader of my prose. Pie Customer's mom holds a brand-new yellow legal pad. She has agreed to review this show for our *Falls Herald-Traveler*. Her likely rave will surely list the complete cast-crew-ushers. Already she sits jotting notes. Wish I'd brought my laptop, even without a new subject . . .

I'm just about to ask her why adults look so much dowdier at musicals starring adolescents, when in walks a couple glamorous enough to prove me dead-wrong. Hello. My exhausted narrative capacity, if not yet stirred, twitches.

Smiling, they ask if seats beside ours might be free. “Please, all yours.” Both are tall athletic blondes with dark eyebrows; their shearling ski jackets match. Windblown, he looks ruddy; she glows nicely-rosy. This storm seems engineered to show off their complexions. I swear they belong onstage and not out here among grandparents’ Greenpeace backpacks, sandals worn over hideous Peruvian socks.

They’re the lion-kingly young parents all high school drama students must want. Instead of, well, *us*—my lovely friend and me, earnest, informed, fiftyish and counting.

Jemma nods at newcomers, gives them a real grin but then, for my eyes only, hand-letters a message across her pad. Nodding others’ way, she shields from them these words:

NOTICE PAIR. SAVE HUNCHES. STORY AFTER. GOOD.

I, finding myself becalmed and itchy between novels, I, seated between my dearest friend and two hot strangers new to me, welcome a sudden challenge. I’ve just been sitting here, bracing for another Suzuki-Method-teens’ atonal stab at Sondheim. Any competing tale-making task excites me. Even without a stubby pencil or an Apple product in hand, aren’t all real writers always writing?

I—shy, intent—beam geniality toward our new lank ones. They’ve settled, easy with each other and soon me. They introduce themselves. I accept each warm hand offered. They give first names only, plus their daughter’s last singing role here—Julie in *Showboat*.

“Sure. Carried it, really. Yale Drama candidate. But would we *want* that for her, is the thing?” I soon quip about tonight’s Sondheim: “Even for kids smart as ours, pretty thorny score, eh?”

She smiles: “And such a wholesome moral! One straight-razor trimming London of all that’s sick, I mean . . .” We demonstrate chuckling. We’re proving ourselves committed to our teens. We’re also showing we can—when briefly left alone—outdo our kids at caustic eye-rolling.

The child orchestra starts tuning up. However cute, that bassoonist sounds tubercular. Kids' conductor, rumored to also be a composer hugely-gifted if as-yet-undiscovered, needs a shave. We can tell tonight's score is going to be tough. Poor guy's already sweated through his shirt-back.

As the couple shucks outerwear (yellow ski-lift tags dangling) I swear I smell cedar. These two might be anywhere under forty. She is saying, "Haven't seen you-all since your boy really helped put over 'Nothing Like a Dame.' Fantastic number, right?"

She explains: their girl will play tonight's mad bag-lady. (Who'll turn out to be the Demon Barber's long-lost wife.) "Uh-oh," the young husband adds. "Hope we're not blowing the play's family secret for you. Had to really smudge up our girl fairly well, just to keep Cara from looking perfect and young. Keeps shining through. Still, she seemed super-into-it, didn't she, babe?"

His left hand falls open across on her jeans' right thigh. Around us, older married couples sit chewing over town politics. But husbands address just husbands; gray-haired wives side-by-side converse. How brave are these young lovers? They keep staring *at* each other!

The strapping young man hurries off for refreshments. He soon brings his lady tonic-water with precisely three lime slices pre-squeezed. I'm sensing concord. Her hair is pale and, as we chat, his hand slides right up under it; he now sits massaging her, ridding her nodes of last workday tension. And she? So used to being touched by this young pro, she chats right through it. Her neck half-crooks, cat-like, settling pivoting back against the expert corners of his usual pleasuring. (*How am I doing?*)

Lights dim as, last thing, our pair joins hands. They smile as if about to witness Broadway history! Being such a unit, they seem cut off from us. And yet, watching the two tilt nearer footlights, it's lonely not being one of them.

Intermission lets us truly talk. We do get jostled by a mother

seeking better seats. This handsome woman of a certain size accompanies twin boys, ten, blond, amazing-looking. I say, "Sorry, taken." She leaves miffed. During the last acts' songs (except those featuring Pie Customer #1) I sit describing for myself the two beside me: Maybe he's fresh-back from long business-travel to China? Seems a postponed reunion is in progress. Something blocked their first-run at romance.

Bet he quarterbacked for some good county school. Guy still gives off a jivey kind of student-government-leadership buzz; that still seems to half-surprise her. His eager-beagle energy softens her actress-caliber looks. The woman's face comes close to being beautiful but turns back last-thing. Seems some loving sacrifice she's made for him.

Finally curtain-call. If fatigued, we do manage our mandatory voluntary standing-ovation. (Parenthood is already a standing-order standing-ovation.) By now, our humid auditorium smells of warmed rubber boots, cold brownie crumbs. My tulips, inverted, appear asleep. Cast-and-crew's kid-siblings doze along every aisle, nested into whispery nylon coats.

Jemma and I say 'bye to the lovebirds, and we all vow to sit together next time. Maybe even catch a bite somewhere after? The young husband pats my upper back. "Was great. Hey, man, you guys still know what *fun* is."

Surely a compliment to live by!

Pie Customer #1 is bound for his cast party. And, as soon as his mom and I are on our own, Jemma laughs. Swears she half-expected those two to start tickling one another like kindergartners.

"But I really *like* being near people that affectionate." I'm already defending them. "Maybe bachelorhood makes me notice it more, but isn't that rare among married straights? They're almost handsome enough to turn up in ads, even movies. Cannot miss the erotic energy. Microwave popcorn going. What're the odds of holding on to that, and with a teenage kid?"

“There’s something I should tell you.” Eyes lowered, she goes somber, almost scaring me.

School parking-lots, underlit past-sundown, look bleak as prison yards. Summer heat must’ve distorted white-painted lines into going this fudge-rippled. November makes everything worse. As do musicals concerning cannibalism.

Driving off school land, Pie Customer’s mom shows me her most sphinxlike grin. “Well?” she asks. “I wrote ‘Notice Couple.’ I did not write, ‘Come *On To* Couple!’ Knew you needed a project. Next time, while waiting for the judgment on your book? maybe take a magazine assignment. You do get edgy, dear. —But, what’d you *make* of them?”

“Okay. I do have a leet-tle something worked up for you. —But first, *why*?”

Smiling, shaking her head no, not yet—there’s some big secret I must earn.

That’s fine. We’ve just been told that, even if over fifty, we still know what fun is.

“Well here goes nothin’, Sherlock Junior. Mmmm—I’d say: Real family-unit-feel. Something prevented their getting together to start with. Maybe bad first marriages? Some barricade I’m feeling. Like they only connected after a trauma. Maybe even some resort-tsunami-rescue-type thing? Something dramatic, yeah. They act so continually relaxed about finally being *with* each other. Gratitude’s always attractive. (But, you notice they were not on terms with other parents? Not a greeting, no seats saved. And even after catching every musical for, what? years. They must usually sit in back or I’d have noticed them.) The honeymoon’s not over by a mile. Both in great shape. See how the whites of their eyes stay so clear? How do some people ‘get’ that? I’d guess it’s *her* family has the money but who cares about all that? In closing, to rest my case: pretty much made for each other. That’s what little I’ve got right now. —But *why*?”

Then my friend tells me.

Driving through the worsening sleet—traffic signals swinging like the severed heads of French aristocrats, our view blasted under hurled bushels of maple leaves—my best friend explains the history of this couple's meeting. She states their tie, their consequent loyalty, their destined trouble. She hints why others tonight looked elsewhere, ignoring the pair's sweet superior warmth.

My intelligent Jemma lays out for me their love's backstory. The romance sounds so inevitable it's immediately too complex. And, soon as I hear their history's pivot, I know. Know I'll soon be telling it. If just to myself. WHY? (Well, I've *shot my bolt on the Civil War*. *You can truly holler "Appomattox" only once*.) Besides, caught atypically off-guard tonight, I need to understand this better. I write for myself and strangers.

To be learned then heard, it must be told. Gladly I accept the job. But, first? where I'm taking you—with your full adult permission, of course—is not toward make-believe. Believe me.

That school-play, that wet night, the most handsome couple not in New York, it all happened precisely as I've told you here. What I'll next reveal cuts as close to Documentary as any trained liar ever dares go.

How scarce is "a truly happy couple"?

How rare is "the cure for cancer"?

Last thing, I ask Jemma for whatever name this couple shares. I say as soon as I get home I might start maybe researching them. You could call this my invasion of their privacy but I truly had no choice. A storyteller's first task is knowing the tale when he sees it. Easy when one's this human.

Within a week I'd Googled them silly. Beyond their stolid credit-ratings I soon gathered JPEGs from separate high school annuals. Their "activity photos," so precious to me now!

The best info often found me by accident, fateful doublings-back. Birth-certificates? right online for all to see. Out there in cyber-