

# Bad Scene, Caesar

by Karl Stull

© August 2022 -

# RESEDA 30-MINUTE THEATRE

*In the park, your classroom, or workplace*

RTMT Season Premiere

Randal D. Simmons Park

Noon, March 15 (Ides of March)

## *The Night Before*

(scenes from *Julius Caesar*)

***Coming soon...***

## *Sheriff of Cawdor County*

(scenes from *Macbeth*)

## *The Balcony and the Crypt*

(scenes from *Romeo and Juliet*)

### ***Critics acclaim***

“Shakespeare, kick in the rear — fast, fun, audience-grabbing drama and entertainment.”

— Marianne Avalone, *Greater Reseda News and Greensheet*

[reverse of preceding page]

## Meet RTMT Principal Players

**Lucius Tiber** as Julius Caesar  
**Mina Blatt** as Calpurnia (wife of Caesar)  
**Barrymore Barnes** as Brutus  
**Alycia Orrick** as Portia (wife of Brutus)  
**Teddy Twickenham** as Decius

**Margot Arrete** — Lady Macbeth  
**Gordon Blalock** — Macbeth  
**Harry Otis** — Macduff  
**Soapy Stovall** — Night Watchman

**ATN Clement** — Romeo Montague  
**Vera Vasquez** — Juliet Capulet  
**Maggie Sebald** — Nurse  
**Dom Perry** — Friar Lawrence

*Please support these generous local businesses:*

**Regalo Properties**  
**Magnifico Art Supplies**  
**Tranquilina's Family Style**  
**Blalock Insurance for Auto/Home/Life**  
**Ha-joon Burgerport**  
**Broup for Bread and Soup**  
**Club Loco**

### **Reseda Thirty-Minute Theatre needs you!**

Actors, stagehands, carpenters, costumers, prop masters...  
Must be available days. Expenses reimbursed. The play is the thing!  
Contact Romeo Davis, Regalo's Rockhound Shop.

# ACT I

Dwell I but in the suburbs of your good pleasure?  
— Portia, *Julius Caesar* II.i.285-6

## Chapter 1

# A Bard in Hand

We opened with *Julius Caesar* on March 15. The Ides of March was of course a theme in the publicity. Everybody knows you better beware the Ides of March. Something unexpected and momentous is going to happen on that date. We had no idea something would.

Caesar damn near bled to death.

The idea for Reseda Thirty-Minute Theatre (RTMT) came to me years ago and wouldn't go away. I had no experience acting, no experience producing. I just thought it would be cool to put on a show in the middle of a workday. Or school day. We would go to audiences wherever they happened to be, and give 'em drama for half an hour. That's a short enough time to fit in a lunch break, long enough to engage emotions — fear, hope, remembered love.

How about *that* with your soggy tuna salad?

This whirly concept began to gather dust on an evening walk as Sally and I passed a flatbed truck parked on Kittridge Street. A sign on the windshield said: "Runs good. \$4,000 cash." The cab was squarish and faded red. The planks in the bed were swollen from years of exposure, and smeared green by trimmings of trees and shrubs. The truck was a workhorse, carrying fairly light loads, mostly in-town.

"Ya wanna buy a truck?" Sally said, showing off her Groucho.

"Where you see a truck, baby. I see a mobile platform for thespian performance."

I put my foot on the nearest tire and vaulted up to the boards. With a big gesture, I declaimed, "Friends...!"

"You realize this truck belongs to somebody."

"Romans!" I rolled the R. "Lend me \$4,000."

"I'm walking away now." Sally took a couple of steps to show she was serious.

"Seriously, I'm walking."

It was too late.

A front door opened and out came a compact man in jeans and long sleeves. He strode across his lawn to the sidewalk by the truck. He had a walrus mustache and deep, dark eyes.

"Good evening, sir," I said.

"You want to buy the truck?"

"Yes, I do."

"You can pay cash?"

"Tomorrow morning I can pay cash."

The man nodded. I was a qualified customer. "It's a good truck. Very reliable. You want to look under the hood?"

"I want my mechanic to look under the hood. Is tomorrow morning okay?"

"Sure, we can go in the morning."

I gave the man a business card. His hands were thick and tough as work gloves. He looked at the card, then up at me. "You work for Luis Regalo?"

"He's my uncle."

"*Felicidades*," said the man. "I am Hector Peña. Your uncle helped me buy this house, twenty years ago. Tell him Hector said hello."

"I will. And let me introduce my friend Sally Heimkrantz. *Somos novios*."

I said we were *novios* because it's warmer than "We're a couple."

Sally put out her hand. Hector took it gently in his. "*Con mucho gusto*, Sally. Your Romeo is a fortunate man."

"I keep telling him."

As Sally and I continued our walk, she asked if I was really going to buy the truck. I said I thought I would. The truck seemed right and so did the moment. The bed was 20 feet, roomy enough for two actors and a tightly choreographed sword fight. I imagined a slide-out extension to double the floorspace of the stage. I imagined closet-sized crates that would hold sets, wardrobe, props, a sound system, whatever a traveling theater might require.

"You realize," Sally pointed out, "this truck is going to need a parking space. An extra-long parking space."

"Hmmm. Hadn't thought about that."

"The homeowners association forbids commercial vehicles."

"What if I leave the truck where it is for now?"

"Street cleaning is Wednesday."

I met Hector the next morning and became the proud owner of a well-worn Ford flatbed. Uncle Luis remembered Hector Peña. He made a note to call Hector. It would be good to reconnect with a happy customer. Also, if Hector was selling his truck, he might be planning to relocate. Regalo Properties had a new agent, Claudia Garza, who could use a

few warm leads to get her career rolling. As to parking the long, flatbed truck, Uncle Luis suggested the airport. The Reseda Gem and Mineral Society had their workshop next to Uncle Luis's hangar. The manager of the workshop, Mike Banks, said I could park in their lot if RGMS could borrow the truck occasionally — when they had equipment to move that was too big for Soapy Stovall's pickup.

With the acquisition of the truck, a substantial object, weighing about 8,000 pounds, the Reseda Thirty-Minute Theatre seemed to acquire gravity. RTMT began to attract other assets with a physical presence in the universe, notably actors. Soapy Stovall was the first. A lean and salty prospector in real life, Soapy was perfect for a supporting role in our Wild West *Macbeth*. The second actor to join was my insurance guy, Gordon Blalock, as the steely-eyed, grim-jawed Sheriff Macbeth. For Lady Macbeth we needed a strong personality and strong voice. That was Margot Arrete, a former high school vocational ed teacher. She could make herself heard over a roomful of teenagers with ball-peen hammers.

Then RTMT gained so much gravity it went supernova. I met ATN Clement, an intern at Flying Pigs Media, the folks who make TV commercials for Regalo Properties. ATN and I got to talking. He had a slew of ideas for the Wild West *Macbeth*, starting with a hologram for Banquo's ghost at the Weird Sisters Saloon. We ended up using none of these first-round ideas, but ATN agreed to direct *The Night Before*, a half-hour sequence from *Julius Caesar*, climaxing in the assassination of the great man in the Capitol. That was the show we premiered on March 15, the one that sent Caesar to the ER.

ATN was an actor as well as a director. He played Romeo Montague in our *Balcony and the Crypt*. For that production, he had an idea about building a playground slide that

ran from the balcony above to the crypt below. Romeo and Juliet would climb onto the slide and literally whoosh down from love-at-first-sight to their double-date with death.

“The audience will *see* it, and they will *get* it,” ATN avowed. “Visual!”

ATN’s real name, on his passport, was Étienne Clement. Before adopting ATN as a stage name, he considered 80n. It looked good — “80n Clement” — but there was brand confusion in his focus group.

“Eighty-en, cool.”

“Like Étienne. Yeah.”

“It’s got street too.”

“Very street.”

“And it’s like algebra.”

“What?”

“80n looks like algebra.”

“That’s not cool.”

“Algebra’s cool. Can be cool.”

“Can be cool. It’s not street.”

“No, not street.”

“And the zero needs a slash.”

“What?”

“Is it a zero or letter O? Changes everything.”

“You see 80n as... Eight Oh en?”

“Eight On. Like right on. Hear it, Eight *On*.”

“I hear Ate On. That’s not cool.”

“Not for the street.”

“Slash is street. Zero with slash.”

“Like the mark of Zorro, but Zero.”

“That’s street.”

“But opposite of cool.”

“What makes a slashed zero not cool?”

“Cool just is. Or is not. Cool never needs clarification.”

“So where are we?”

“Ditch the numbers. All caps.”

“A...T...N.”

“What about a hyphen?”

“A hyphen???”

“Capital A hyphen TN, pronounced like Étienne.”

ATN was a senior at Calabasas College, majoring in Theater Arts. Calabasas was a small school for rich kids. ATN’s father, Colonel Charles Valéry Clement, was a high official in Haiti’s national police. ATN lived in Topanga Canyon with an aunt, Lili Celèste Clement, once an actress in American and French movies.

ATN had an idea for how to stage the assassination of Julius Caesar. Before Caesar’s assassination in Act III, Scene 1, Shakespeare gives us two scenes about talking things over with your wife. In the first, Portia notices Brutus is troubled. She bids him “unfold to me, yourself, your half / Why you are so heavy...” Seeing her devotion, and her courage, Brutus confides his plans and fears about tomorrow, the Ides of March. Caesar takes a different course. He accepts Calpurnia’s warning — “Do not go forth today!” — but

then changes his mind, seduced by a flatterer who happens to be one of the assassins. Caesar finds out soon enough he should have listened to his wife.

ATN's idea was to continue the "seduction by flattery" into the assassination scene. The six murderous senators would use caressing gestures and idolizing tones of voice as they closed in. They would violate Caesar's body with their thrusting knives.

"Like a mugging with heavy-petting," ATN exclaimed. "So visual!"

The actor playing Caesar had a different vision. Lucius Tiber wanted Caesar to go down fighting. He called for a ninja-style battle with Caesar driving off attackers in every direction.

"You want visual?" Lucius exclaimed, "I'll give you visual."

Lucius leapt and spun into a fusillade of kicks and chops, finishing with a back flip. He was a man of girth, but nimble.

There was a great deal of further discussion about the body language at Caesar's assassination. Ultimately, it was for naught. The scene did not go at all as planned.

Shortly after 9am on March 15, I parked the Bardmobile on Archwood Street, south of the park, in a space reserved for us with city cones. Cast and crew were on hand to pull the stage out to full width, raise the Capitol backdrop, and post our "RTMT Presents..." sign. We did not set out chairs. This greatly increased our chances for a standing ovation, said Barrymore Barnes, playing the part of Brutus.

Woodworker Zev Young bolted a flight of steps to the edge of the stage. Caesar would press through the crowd and go up these steps to the Capitol. Zev had given many hours to the shaping and finishing of the treads and risers, hoping the audience would wonder if they were marble.

The curious began to gather about an hour before showtime. Mina Blatt's pantomime students from Sylvia Street Middle School kept the growing crowd entertained. The kids performed from prompts such as *The Man in the Glass Cage*, *I Am a Dog*, and *Walking in the Rain*. Insurance man Gordon Blalock, who would play Sheriff Macbeth in our next production, acted as head of security for *Julius Caesar*. He and two helpers, Soapy Stovall and Misty Greaves, roamed the audience and kept people clear of the stage.

"A good mix," Gordon reported. "Office workers, seniors from the library, staff from the nursing home, councilmember's office, people from the bus stop. A few street people."

"Any crazies?" I asked. "People hearing voices?"

"I don't see any obvious problems."

"What about that guy in the toga?"

"He's not your usual fresh-faced re-enactor," Gordon admitted.

Toga Man had a lean and hungry look. Years of outdoor work had so weathered him, he might have been any age from thirty to sixty. He seemed calm and interested in his surroundings, not overly intent or distracted.

"Getty Villa volunteer?" I conjectured.

With a doubtful wrinkle of his brow, Gordon said, "I'll keep an eye on him."

The preteen pantomimes left the stage. It was time for the Prologue to settle the audience. I bounded up Zev's marble-like steps and raised my hands.

"Citizens of Reseda, welcome. This is a day we are all going to remember, a day of mighty portent, tradition, and moment. The Ides of March. You are here for the first performance of the first production of the Reseda Thirty-Minute Theatre. You'll tell your grandchildren of this day, how you were here to see a great man laid low. And a great theatrical institution being

born. In years to come, you will cast a jaundiced eye on others who will claim they were here today and yet cannot recall that the Prologue was wearing... an Alpine hiker's hat!"

I raised my hat, and a fanfare blared from street-shaking speakers in ATN's Escalade. Car doors flew open, and the toga-clad RTMT players came in procession toward the stage.

"Citizens of Reseda, he comes," I cried out. "Hail, Caesar!" The audience picked up the chant. "Hail, Caesar! Hail, Caesar!"

Lucius waved benignly, making his way through the adoring masses. He ascended the steps, exuding command. Underlings tried three times to place a crown on his head. He refused it each time. Caesar had power. He did not need a crown.

"Beware the Ides of March!" cried ATN as the Soothsayer.

"What man is that?" Caesar was surprised at the Soothsayer's words of warning.

"A soothsayer bids you beware the idea of March," said Barrymore Barnes as Brutus.

One by one, the players disappeared backstage. Curtains unrolled and thudded onto the stage floor, concealing the Capitol backdrop.

As the Prologue, I spoke again to the audience. "You've heard that Brutus is an honorable man. Hear now that Brutus is — like Caesar — a married man. Let us now listen in to these two very public men, Brutus and Caesar, as they are at home."

Alycia Orrick won the audience over as Brutus' young wife — earnest and overly serious in the way the young often are. The audience gaped in shock when Portia revealed to Brutus the knife wound in her leg, self-inflicted to prove she could bear pain as stoically as a man.

In the next scene, Mina as Caesar's wife, though a dreamer of prophetic dreams, was neither wispy nor loopy. She gave her husband sound military advice ("Do not go") based on reconnaissance she had collected from the other side. In Calpurnia's dream, Caesar was a statue

spurting blood. The flatterer Decius invented a favorable interpretation for the troubling vision. Mina pleaded as a woman pleads for love of her life mate. She begged on her knees.

The assassination scene went perfectly until the knives came out. Caesar stood at the Capitol. The senators swirled around him, pressing a petition they knew he would not grant. They edged Caesar into position at the top of Zev's steps. The senators drew weapons from the sleeves of their robes. They made stabbing gestures. They gripped him from three sides and began to lower him onto the steps, where his face would ogle the audience upside down.

*"Et tu, Brute?"* Lucius declaimed. "Then fall, Caesar."

Toga Man came forward to join the attack. He thrust a chef's knife into Lucius' back.

Despite himself, Lucius cried out. "Oowww! Aaagh! Goddamn it, what happened?"

The audience, uncertain of what they just witnessed, held its breath. Was it a theater trick? Had something gone wrong?

Toga Man shouted to the audience, "Liberty! Freedom! Tyranny is dead!"

And he ran away from the stage, toward Vanalden Ave. He shed his toga as he ran, revealing black jeans and a black t-shirt. He scooped up a bicycle lying beside a pine tree.

ATN sprang from backstage. The young director saw Toga Man escaping and sprinted after him, cursing in Haitian French. Toga Man's bicycle was a drug runner's special, flat black with broomstick struts and racing tires. Toga Man swung south on Vanalden. He would reach the LA River in two minutes. And disappear.

"Liberty, freedom," lamented Cinna, played by Harry Otis. "That was supposed to be my line."

## Chapter 2

# Cry “Havoc!”

In a traditional theater, the curtain would have come down. The stage manager would have come out front and explained to the audience that the performance had been halted and could not continue, due to an injury to one of the actors. The stage manager would then have asked, “Is there a doctor in the house?”

RTMT had a nurse backstage, Maggie Sebald. She was to play the part of the Nurse in our *Romeo and Juliet*. There is method in the madness of my RTMT recruiting.

Maggie ran to the marble-like steps, first aid kit in hand, and was examining Lucius’ wound, before I reached the stage and found a microphone.

“Thank you, everyone, for keeping calm. Nine-one-one has been called. Paramedics and police are on the way. The police will probably get here first. The station is right over there on the other side of the park. Be patient. The police may want to ask what you saw. If you have any photos or videos from today, they may be important evidence. Aha, I see a black and white turning onto Vanowen, possibly coming our way. No, sorry, they turned north toward Sherman Way. There’s another car coming out of the station. Could be for us. Here’s good news. It looks like Julius Caesar is going to be all right. Can we give Lucius Tiber a big round of applause, everyone!”

Lucius was sitting up, as Maggie applied pressure to the wound in his upper back. Lucius waved to the audience with his right hand. His left hand hung limp. Lucius smiled, he

nodded as if to say “damn right,” and he waved some more. Lucius pulled the laurel wreath from his hair and spun it into the crowd — a souvenir for some lucky theater-goer.

Doors flew open from both sides of the police car. Two officers approached the stage at a fast walk, keeping a tactical distance from each other, taking in facts such as crowd size, layout of equipment, avenues of entry and escape...

Officer Reeves took the lead. The other officer could have been the daughter he brought to work, girdled in black leather wallets of cop gear. Officer Reeves had a round, fleshy face and gray eyes that had seen it all.

I introduced myself as the event organizer. I gave Officer Reeves a hundred-word summary of what happened. I mentioned Lucius Tiber and Gordon Blalock as the victim and a witness, respectively.

Officer Reeves nodded. He turned to the crowd.

“The assailant, the man with the knife — has anyone seen that man before? Does anyone recognize him from around the neighborhood?”

A wispy woman in wire-rim glasses and a cardigan raised a timid hand. She might have been in her forties, and this might have been the first time she had spoken with police about a crime. Officer Reeves tossed his head back, meaning she should come forward.

“I see him sometimes at the library,” she said. “My name is Robin Rayner.”

“The library,” Officer Reeves repeated. “You’ve seen him more than once.”

“Several times.” She pushed a poof of brownish hair back, a habit. “He seems to be interested in history.”

“What makes you think he’s interested in history?”

“He gets a stack of books, all 20th century history. *The Mexican Revolution, Assassination of Trotsky, The Bay of Pigs*. It seems like he’s actually reading. Not just, you know, killing time.”

Officer Reeves asked her for a physical description of the man. Robin Rayner said the man had thick black eyebrows and rather small ears. Officer Reeves cocked his head and spoke into a microphone on his shoulder, reporting the eyebrows and ears.

“We have eyes on the river,” Officer Reeves explained. “We’re looking at anyone who showed up in the last hour.”

The thumping of a police helicopter was audible in the distance. Hawks circled above the river most days. LAPD helicopters, the same.

I telephoned Sally and then Uncle Luis.

“That’s crazy,” Sally said. “You’re sure Lucius is all right?”

“Maggie thinks so. She said the knife hit his shoulder blade. Torn muscle but not much bleeding. They’ll do an x-ray at the hospital to make sure the lung was not involved.”

“But why would anyone do such a thing? It’s crazy.”

“The guy was wearing a toga, but otherwise he didn’t act crazy. In fact, his toga looked like one of our togas — like he was in the cast. The certifiably crazy thing was, after the stabbing, he recited the next line in the script. ‘Freedom. Liberty. Tyranny is dead.’ But everyone’s okay. We’re going ahead with the cast party tonight. We’ll figure out then what to do next.”

“Exit stage right,” Sally said.

Uncle Luis wondered if Toga Man was someone he knew.

“Now that you mention it,” I said, “he could have been from the Roscoe Boulevard Boys way back when. Or one of your rival gangs. But there was something not local about him. He’s spent a lifetime outdoors.”

“Did he have an accent, when he recited the Shakespeare?”

“You know, possibly Cuban? It was fast, clear enunciation. Apparently, he likes to read modern history. That’s according to the lady who saw him in the library.”

“Maybe a guerilla from Colombia or Nicaragua,” Uncle Luis said, pronouncing guerilla to rhyme with see-ya. “How does an *hombre* like that end up in the Valley?”

“I wonder why he cares about Shakespeare in the park.”

“It’s worrisome,” Uncle Luis said. “A character like that, *un caballero cuestionable*. I should have heard he was around.”

“The police were asking if anybody took a photo. Plenty of people saw him up close.”

“I’ll give Cabrera a call. Please tell Lucius I hope he is feeling good again soon.”

The Bardmobile took longer to pack up than to unload. It was nearly six when I pulled in at the airport. I asked Wes Fishwick if I could park in the hangar overnight. He said sure, one of the MegaLith Otters was in Nevada for the week. Sally picked me up, and we stopped for dinner at Ha-joon’s Burgerport.

Wrapped in a chef’s white apron, Ha-joon brought our plates to the table and sat beside Sally. “So what happened at the park?”

“A guy from the audience, wearing a toga, came on stage and stabbed Lucius. Lucius is okay, just a flesh wound. How did you hear about it so fast?”

“It’s on the news.” Ha-joon pointed over his shoulder to the television. He ran the news backward with a remote, and there was Lucius propped up in a hospital bed. Reporter Angela

Boniface asked Lucius how surprised was he to be stabbed with a real knife during a performance of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* in Randal Simmons Park shortly after noon today.

"I was very surprised," Lucius beamed. "It was a play after all, a mere portrayal of imagined events, rehearsed many times with fellow cast members, and my humble self in the title role. Alas, the knife was all too real."

Lucius grimaced for the camera.

"The police have no motive for the attack," Angela said. "Did you recognize the man with the knife?"

"He stabbed me in the back," Lucius protested, "in the middle of a rather epic dying scene. I did not get a good look at him."

Angela Boniface turned to the camera. "And so investigation continues into a mysterious, possibly random, outbreak of violence at an outdoor theater event in Simmons Park. Reporting live from Reseda General Hospital, I'm Angela Boniface."

Upstaging Angela, Lucius turned his face to profile, like Caesar on a Roman coin. Somehow he had gotten his laurel wreath back.

Topic number one at the cast party, at Gordon Blalock's house, was Lucius' appearance on the local news. It was the universal opinion by the time Sally and I arrived that Lucius had called Channel 4 himself.

"I bet he offered them an exclusive," sneered Barrymore Barnes, "the conniving bitch!"

"Dear Brutus," Alycia Orrick crooned in her Portia voice. "The fault is not in our star but in ourselves."

Barrymore sputtered, "Lucius Tiber is not our star — yours, mine, or anybody's."

"He's the one who got on TV," Alycia pointed out.

“All publicity is good publicity,” offered Gordon Blalock.

“If the show goes on,” said bewhiskered Soapy Stovall. His arms in short sleeves were skinny as the beer bottle in his hand.

“The show *must* go on,” declared Dom Perry, mild-mannered math teacher at the community college.

“Oh, jolly good,” intoned Teddy Twickenham. “Caesar gets stabbed, and his understudy says the show must go on.”

“Don’t be an ass, Teddy,” said Maggie Sebald, valiant nurse in today’s commotion. “Is anybody going to ask what exactly happened today? Is the same thing going to happen at the next show?”

“Nothing is going to happen at the next show,” said ATN. He spoke as the director, though he was younger than everyone except Vera Vasquez, our Juliet. “We’re going to be indoors next time, at Reseda High School. Today was just a one-off, crazy ... thing.”

“Let’s hope so,” said Gordon Blalock, host of the party, insurance agent, and chief of the *Julius Caesar* security detail. “We are not covered for audiences that want real blood.”

“Is this a good time to ask about life insurance?” Teddy asked.

When the group laugh subsided, Gordon was droll. “Stop by my office.”

“So, Mr. Producer,” said Misty Greaves, wardrobe mistress, “the plan is we are going ahead as scheduled? If so, I’ll need to get Caesar’s toga back for washing. It was bloody.”

“And stitching,” Vera added, “where the knife, like, went through.”

I said yes, we were going ahead as scheduled. I would check with the principal at Reseda High and address any concerns. After that, we had a booking in the Regalo Properties Building. The audience would be bank customers and others from professional offices. Meanwhile, the

police were pursuing leads on Toga Man. Our next outdoor performance would be at the Sherman Way Street Fair in two weeks. “Even if the police can’t find Toga Man, he’s unlikely to come for an encore. We know what he looks like.”

“As an actor,” said Vera Vasquez, “I ask myself: what was Toga Man’s motivation? Did he mean to kill Lucius, or was he striking a blow against Caesar as a figure of oppression?”

“I assumed he was a reviewer,” said Teddy. “No stars, one stab.”

“Lucius is an unforgivable ham,” injected Barrymore. “That bit on television showed a complete lack of decent self-restraint.”

“Methinks there is ham enough in the room to go around,” said Maggie.

“Are you implying...?” blustered Barrymore. “I’ll have you know I have more stage experience than everyone in this room put together!”

“Lucius is all right,” insisted Mina Blatt. “He gives his all, like it or not.”

Mina Blatt was our second most experienced actor. She headed the Speechless Theatre mime troupe and gave classes in the school district. She played Caesar’s wife, and she was the director of *Sheriff of Cawdor County*.

“Who’s ready for Gorgonzola Fig Bites?” sang Melissa Blalock, setting a new tray of hors d’oeuvres on the coffee table.

“Vera raises a good point,” said Margot Arrete, aka Mrs. Macbeth. Margot was formerly Vera’s teacher in high school, and continued to serve as her advocate and mentor. “We don’t know who or what Toga Man thought he was attacking. Was he attacking Lucius, or was he attacking all of us? Or was he battling demons all his own, nothing to do with us?”

Vera added, “Toga Man might have been protesting the very institution of theater — a bourgeois indulgence for Wall Street underlings, controlled by imperialist puppet-masters.”

“I don’t know about no puppet-masters, little lady,” said Soapy. “Seemed to me Toga Man wanted to be in the show. He come in costume. He even made a speech, afore he lit out.”

Dom Perry exclaimed, “He wanted to be one of us, if we judge by his actions and not by our fears.”

“By his actions,” said ATN, “he made himself an outcast. He can’t come anywhere near us again. He knows he’ll go straight to prison.”

“He may have been in prison already, by the look of him,” remarked Melissa, sampling a cheese ball from the tray. “Mmm, these fig bites are funky-sweet.”

“Has anyone here been in prison?” asked Teddy, amused by the sudden stillness his question brought to the room. Furtive glances flew. “Come on, everyone. The world’s a stage. In our time, we play many parts.”

Margot spoke up, loud and clear. “My baby brother did time. He was a car thief in those days. I used to visit him in Lancaster.”

“What was it like?” Mina asked. “Inside the prison.”

“It reminded me of jury duty.” Margot thought back. “Badges, plastic chairs, waiting rooms. The parking was easier.”

“What happened to your brother?”

“Benny was really scared at first,” Margot said. “He got parole after two years. Now he works in the family business.”

“What business?”

“Busy Bee Hardware, on Tampa north of Sherman Way.”

“I’ve been there. Old-fashioned hardware store. Wooden cabinets, with little drawers up to the ceiling!”

“I never go there,” Margot said, “ever.”

ATN spoke next. “My father had an office at the main detention facility in Port au Prince. There were prisoners in back. A lot of history back there. I never heard screams or anything, but it was scary.”

“I did fourteen months,” Dom admitted quietly. “Receiving stolen property.”

“You, in a burglary ring?” gasped Teddy. “You don’t seem at all the international jewel thief type.”

“Nothing like that. My roommate was a fence.”

“I hope that was not your defense in court.”

“The judge said ... I needed to choose better friends.”

Toward eleven, as the party was about to break up, Lucius staggered in.

The emergency room doctor had prescribed strict rest for ten days. “Regrettably, I’ll miss the Reseda High performance. However, the Regalo Building crowd will get the Caesar they see on the menu. With anchovies!”

“We’re all glad you’re back, Lucius,” said ATN, eyeing the bulge of bandaging under Lucius’ shirt. “As soon as the doctor says you’re ready.”

“With anchovies? What does that even mean?” Vera demanded.

Teddy rejoined, “It means Caesar thinks these are his salad days.”

“I must say,” said Barrymore, “you made a fool of yourself and all of us on the six o’clock news.”

Lucius registered surprise. “Was I not on at five o’clock too? Angela promised...”

“You were on the five o’clock and the six,” said Alycia, “and you were great both times.”

“I recorded it,” said Dom, “if you want a copy.”

“Thank you,” Lucius bowed. “You are the perfect understudy, Dom. Break a leg at Reseda High.”

“I’ll do my best,” said Dom. “Of course, you’re the star.”

“No, he bloody well is not the star,” growled Barrymore. “Julius Caesar is the title character, but the hero of the tragedy is Brutus.”

Uncertainty filled the room, like the aroma of Gorgonzola.

“How can Brutus be the hero?” Vera demanded. “Mark Antony kicks his ass.”

“No doubt Brutus is the central character, if you consider the whole play,” Alycia said. “But we’re not doing the whole play.”

“That’s right, we’re doing just three scenes,” said Soapy. “The day of the killin’, and two scenes the night before. Brutus talkin’ with his wife, and Caesar talkin’ with his’n.”

Lucius and Barrymore nodded warily, knitting their brows and calculating the effects of abridgement on the heroic center of gravity.

Alycia continued in her Portia voice. “Brutus sees his wife as an ally, courageous and strong. Caesar sees his wife as fearful and weak. Both of these men then go on to make some catastrophically bad mistakes. To my mind, the character who stands the tallest is neither Brutus nor Caesar.”

“You mean...” gasped Vera, surprised by an answer more revolutionary than she could have guessed.

“Yes, the hero of our drama is Portia.”

## *Chapter 3*

# Let Slip the Dog

Blue waves crashed white beside Pacific Coast Highway, a two-lane stretch beyond Point Dume. It was a postcard afternoon, perfect for S-curves and feeling the chassis lean this way and then the other. I thought about putting the top down, but my car is a hardtop sedan, owned by Regalo Properties. It has a Marine Corps bumper sticker in back because Uncle Luis bought the car used. I was returning to the office after a visit with my grandmother.

Detective Sergeant Hamish was along for the ride.

The Detective Sergeant and I reviewed various theories of the stabbing in Randal Simmons Park. The police search for Toga Man had run into a wall. Regulars on the LA River — homeless, addicts, gang members — recognized Toga Man as someone they saw from time to time, not in costume. He did no business on the river and did not hang out. Always passing through. He was known to members of Los Bravos as Commando, because he came across as dangerous and sometimes carried military gear. His Spanish was odd, as if he came from someplace remote. He was on a mission, people said, half-joking.

The FBI did not recognize Toga Man, and they were not aware of unusual local activity by subjects associated with Latin American paramilitaries.

“What would Latin American paramilitaries be doing in Los Angeles?” I asked.

“Raising cash, buying weapons,” Detective Sergeant Hamish suggested. “They have a history in drug trafficking.”

Lacking evidence to support any other explanation, the police were leaning toward mental illness as the motive for the attempted murder of Julius Caesar.

“Yeah, yeah,” I said. “If we can’t figure it out, it must be mental illness.”

“A fair objection,” Hamish admitted.

“Calling Toga Man crazy tells us nothing about what to expect.”

“Very true, sir.”

“Soapy said Toga Man wanted to be in the play,” I recalled. “Crazy as that sounds, it gives us a picture of why he did what he did. If Soapy’s theory is anywhere near right, it means we should expect him to strike again.”

“A troubling supposition, sir.”

“What if we reach out to Toga Man? What if we offer him a part in the show?”

“A bold idea,” the Detective Sergeant said, “but possibly dangerous to others in the cast and crew.”

“Detective Sergeant, you raise a good point.”

“Thank you, sir. I only wish I’d been on duty that day at the park. I’d have brought the blighter down, no doubt of it.”

“I know you would have.”

“Why, sir, if I may ask, did you not have me at the park that day?”

“I wish I had, but there was so much going on. It was the first time out for Reseda Thirty-Minute Theatre: the stage, the flats, getting people in their places.. And the leash law in the park, you know. It was too much.”

Detective Sergeant Hamish flashed the grin that said we agreed about everything. It’s the signature look of a West Highland White Terrier, a face that says he’s glad to see you.

Most of the time, I believe, he really is glad, but the look is there day and night, even when you're pouring the less-preferred, weight-management kibble into his bowl. Too-tall ears, lackadaisical tongue, black button eyes — it's a combination that has served the breed well in their companionship with humans.. The only time Hamish looks other than glad to see you is when he's barking at a German shepherd three times his size.

"We don't talk like this as much anymore," I said.

"It's understandable, sir."

"Understandable?"

"You do a lot of your thinking aloud with her now."

"Sally."

"That's the one, sir."

"Do you regret how things have changed?"

The Detective Sergeant gave me the inscrutable happy-dog look.

"Sir, she's your mate. I protect the both of you."

Oh, he's a damn good dog.

I said, "I love her, you know. I want every day of my life to have Sally in it. I'm grateful you're looking out for us."

"All in a day's work, sir. No need to get all wet."

Detective Sergeant Hamish turned to consider a colony of sea lions arrayed on rocks to our right. The ocean foamed white around the barking beasts. It would not be necessary today to challenge the sea lions. It was enough to know they were there. If someday we encountered them again, Hamish might have to show the brutes what a West Highland White Terrier is made of.

“Soapy’s theory is bollocks,” the Detective Sergeant said.

“Bollocks?”

“Toga Man didn’t want to be in the play, sir. He wanted to hijack the play for his own purposes.”

“What were his purposes?”

“I don’t know any more than you, sir.”

“If you don’t know his purposes, how can you know he didn’t want to be in the play?”

“I know he didn’t want to be in the play, sir, in the same way you know it.”

“You think I know Toga Man didn’t want to be in the play?”

“Sir, I know you know he didn’t want to be in the play, for the simple reason that Toga Man put a stop to the play. He nearly killed the whole RTMT enterprise. Every actor, sir, believes the show must go on.”

“That’s very true.”

“There is one other thing that you know, sir.”

“Yes?”

“You know Toga Man did not mean to kill Lucius.”

“How do I know that?”

“He made no attempt to finish the job, sir.”

“He was in kind of a hurry.”

“On the contrary, sir. Toga Man carried out three tasks, all in good order, with maximum efficiency. He drew blood. He announced ‘Tyranny is dead.’ And he made a clean getaway, which included disrobing on the run and mounting a bicycle. Check, check, check.

He ran off without assessing the victim and without so much as one extra stab for good measure.”

“Mission accomplished. What was the purpose of the mission?”

“He came. He stabbed. He spoke a line about tyranny. The purpose of the mission, sir, was political protest.”

“Protest against what?”

“Against tyranny, sir.”

“Which tyranny? Who’s the tyrant?”

“I don’t know, sir, any more than you.”

“You said that before.”

“It’s still true, sir.”

“This is a shaky theory, Detective Sergeant. The point of a public protest is for the public to know which injustice you’re protesting against. There are many to choose from.”

”A fair objection, sir.”

“What if the goal was self-aggrandizement, and the whole thing was just a stunt?”

“Like a streaker, sir.”

“Exactly. Like a guy running naked across the outfield at the World Series. There is a kind of glory in being the one who caused an uproar. Admittedly, our crowd was small up against the World Series.”

“Don’t forget the six o’clock news, sir.”

“You raise another good point, Detective Sergeant. There was the five o’clock news too.”

Lucius had been particular about expecting the story to air at five o’clock.

The Detective Sergeant leaned toward his window, allowing the rush of wind to ruffle the white curls around his leathery nose.

0 0 0

We turned from PCH onto Highway 27, heading north through Topanga Canyon. The canyon cracked a path from the ocean to the semi-desert suburbs of San Fernando Valley. The route was scenic, climbing a hillside covered with grasses, chaparral, and scrub oak. The grasses were green this time of year. Sunlight flooded the high walls of tortured rock on the other side of Topanga Creek.

Culturally, Topanga Canyon was a bohemian refuge between the too-cool coast and vapid Valley. Restaurants were woodsy, the boutiques scrupulously ramshackle. There was valet parking on unpaved lots. For the Detective Sergeant's edification, I called out names of rock stars and movie celebrities at side streets and oak-shaded driveways as we passed. Robo-ready, colored-coded garbage cans stood in line at the asphalt's edge. Wednesday is trash day in Topanga Canyon.

"This one goes to ATN's aunt's house," I said, indicating a gated and camera'd drive curving out of sight behind hedges as formal as any at Versailles.

Lili Celeste Clement had been in several classic movies — *Black Orpheus*, *Sounder*, and *Savage Coast*. I told the Detective Sergeant, "She was also in *Shaft*, which you may have heard of."

"No, sir. I don't see a lot of movies."

"Hmmm, I guess not," I said. "How do you feel about movies on TV?"

“Everything smells the same on television,” replied the Detective Sergeant. “Like warm dust.”

“Smells are important.”

“Very important, sir. We dogs appreciate the whiff of drama. Love, power, fear, desperation — all bring their bouquets.”

“What about the visuals?”

“ATN likes visuals, sir.”

“Yes, he does. And you?”

“Flickering lights to me, sir, seen through a window. That’s TV.”

The Detective Sergeant attended to an itch by his ear with a high-speed hind-leg whacking. He added, “TV has good sounds. Doorbells. On TV, a doorbell seems to come out of nowhere.”

On our left, I hailed Theatricum Botanicum. Its forested stage is a local treasure, and an inspiration for Reseda Thirty-Minute Theatre.

We stopped at Misty’s Costume Closet, about a mile farther on. The shop was once a land sales office, back when you could have bought the whole canyon for less than a million. On the inside, the shop was like a corner library with clothes instead of books. Suits and dresses hung from double-decker racks in boustrophedon aisles from one wall to the other. The clothes were sorted by era, gender, and size. You could dress as a lord or lady in any century from the Crusades to the abdication. There were a dozen variations for dressing up as an upstairs maid.

“Romeo, hey! You want to rent a zoot suit again?”

Misty Greaves emerged from a 1940s rack, parting square-shouldered jackets like a stage curtain.

“Hey, you brought Hamish. What’s shakin’, dawg?”

“I have a toga with a hole in the shoulder.” I held out a ball of white laundry.

“Lucius’s toga,” Misty said. She added, “That’s hard to say. Loosh-us-ez.”

“There’s a bloodstain too. Will that come out?”

Misty took the garment, raising one end high and letting the rest roll down to full length. She shook her bangs for a closer look. Though gray now, Misty had been a Peter, Paul, and Mary blonde in the 1960s. She wore a tie-dyed blouse with batwing sleeves and a pair of bell-bottom jeans. The hems were embroidered with buttercups. Misty pursed her lips to an expression meaning “Eh, not so bad.”

“Hydrogen peroxide may work for the bloodstain,” she said.

“Sew up the knife hole?”

“No prob,” she said. “A few stitches, tuck ’em into a fold, and done. Unless...”

“Unless what?”

“Unless you want to preserve Lucius’ toga the way it is.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Collector’s item.” Misty brushed her bangs aside. “Think of it. How many times has Julius Caesar been assassinated on stage? Thousands of times, tens of thousands. On any summer day in America, there is a theater somewhere putting on this play—Oregon, Illinois, South Carolina. Now, out of all these performances, how many times does the “Et tu, Brute” moment result in a flesh wound, bleeding real blood? Never! It’s a play. It’s pretend. But then, out of nowhere, it happens. One time — at the very first performance by the

Reseda Thirty-Minute Theatre. Romeo, you can't scrub and patch a piece of theater history. Boy, you need a new toga."

The bloody toga was a holy relic. I was going to need a glass case to keep the relic in. Also I would need a place in which to park the glass case. A lobby somewhere. Someday a museum, an RTMT Museum with a gift shop and discounts for students and seniors. The bloody toga seemed to be doubling every minute, like a monster from space.

"I can whip up a new toga," Misty continued. "Half a day, counting a trip to the fabric store, plus another fitting for Lucius. He is a man of peculiar drapery, you know. Say \$250."

"Say \$125," I countered.

"You sweet-talkin' man, Romeo Davis," Misty purred. "Are you squeezing a poor widow lady out of her livelihood?"

"We're street-corner theater, Misty. All I need for Caesar is a bedsheet and a clothespin."

Misty sighed. "All right, the show must go on. I'll tell you one thing though."

"What's that?"

"The toga that Toga Man was wearing was no bedsheet."

"Really, you saw it up close?"

"Yeah, with all the waiting around, I went over to the grass where he dropped it."

"You didn't tamper with evidence?"

"Hey, I watch the same cop shows you do."

"What did you see?"

"I saw snaps."

"Snaps?"

“Maybe you noticed Toga Man didn’t have to pull the toga off over his head. That’s because there were snaps sewn down the side. One pull, off it came.”

Sewn-in snaps. That meant Toga Man had put days of thought and preparation into his moment on the stage — a pretend assassination turned real but not quite as real as it looked at first. Toga Man never intended to kill Lucius.

“Tell me one more thing, Misty...”

“What’s that?”

“How similar was Toga Man’s toga to our togas? Is it possible he was wearing one of ours?”

“His toga was a medium-weight, milk-white cotton blend, with a satin lining. It was cut on the bias, gathered around the torso, and frogged over the shoulder. Blind-stitching around the hem. That was a \$250 toga.”

“Was it one of ours, modified with snaps?”

“There’s not a lot of difference between one senatorial toga and another — until you get to the purple trim. Toga Man’s trim had a crenellated pattern. It was not one of ours.”

“It was not one of the togas you made.”

“Nope, though it was pretty close. Whoever made his toga could have seen one of mine and made a copy. Or they may have seen photos. Toga Man’s toga was made to fit him at the waist, and it had the snaps.”

Thinking back to the dress rehearsal, a week before we opened, I tried to remember if anyone was twitchy about their costume. Did anyone insist on taking their toga home? We were all twitchy about the costumes. We were a bunch of amateurs — excepting Barrymore Barnes, of course. And Mina Blatt.

“Did you share any of this with Officer Reeves, about the snaps?”

“Sure. I told him about the snaps.”

“What did he say?”

“Hey, you met the guy. He wrote it down in a notebook, then acted like he never heard a word I said.”

“He didn’t think the snaps were important?”

“I told him the snaps were meant for getting the toga off in a hurry. He gave me a look — like he clicked the remote and got muppets instead of football.”

“That might be a cop thing. They all do it.”

“Well,” said Misty, “it’s not like everyone had snaps n their togas in 44 B.C.”

## *Chapter 4*

# Greek to Me

Now is the time

Interview Lucius, only one stab, like a med student did it, Lucius enemies

At top of Topanga, song by

All the trains and buses turn around when they hit NoHo  
Ain't nothin' west of Universal City worth traveling to  
Nowhere you want to go  
Nobody you want to know  
Ain't nothin' of a cultural nature out there to do

Welcome to the San Forgotten Valley  
Everybody fresh from nowhere seems to flock here  
...  
Pretty lawns and spokes on the fence on every block here

I met and woo'd a woman from Los Feliz  
We were in love but something had to give  
She said "Great your sex appeal is  
But dearest heart the deal is  
I cannot wrap my mind around where you live

Welcome to the San Forgotten Valley...

Barney's Bikes malevolent owner

## *Chapter 5*

# The Eye Sees Not Itself

Now is the time

To turn the record over

Question raised: Are these attacks directed at ATN? He recognizes TG as bkgrd figure acting as surveillance/bodyguard. Elab latter function, rescue at party perhaps.

Lili confesses she sent TG to ensure ATN notoriety does not become a prob.

Tomas Guillen a retired special ops from French Foreign Lwgion, asg security at rocket launches from Guiana Space Centre. Hired by ATN's father as body guard. Instructed by Lili Celeste Clement to foil

# ACT II

O, full f scorpions is my mind, dear wife!  
— Macbeth, *Macbeth* III.2.36

A threatening note

## *Chapter 6*

### The Raven Himself Is Hoarse

Now is the time

To turn the record over

note

## *Chapter 7*

### Unsex Me Here

Now is the time

To turn the record over

note

## *Chapter 8*

### Give Me the Daggers

Now is the time

To turn the record over

note

*Chapter 9*

'Twas a Rough Night

Now is the time

To turn the record over

note

*Chapter 10*

His Hour upon the Stage

Now is the time

To turn the record over

note

*Chapter 0*

Title

Now is the time

To turn the record over

# ACT III

Too like the lightning, which doth cease to be  
Ere one can say, "It lightens."

— Juliet Capulet, *Romeo and Juliet* II.2.119-20

ATN passes out cold on stage

# ACT IV

Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven [while he]  
Himself the primrose path of dalliance treads...  
— Ophelia, *Hamlet* I.3.48,50

ATN's understudy runs away. Barrymore volunteers. (But you're in your 60s.)  
Blalock and Romeo discuss Hamlet scene for future. Blalock sees insurance perspective of I.3, an entire family would wipe out. Double indemnity, but no beneficiary to collect.  
Pardon my saying, it's an insurance grand slam. Actuary's nightmare, adjuster's grand slam.  
I'll forget you said that.

## *Chapter 0*

# Most Retrograde to Our Desire

Now is the time

## *Chapter 0*

# Whips and Scorns of Time

3e Régiment Étranger d'Infanterie (3ème REI), based in French Guiana, protection of the

Centre Spatial Guyanais, a European Space Agency (ESA) facility... Close-quarters

combat

Counterinsurgency

Counter-narcotics operation

Jungle warfare

Raiding

Reconnaissance

Security assistance

Urban warfare

Size 675 men In 2004, the 3rd Foreign Infantry Regiment engaged in Operation Carbet (French: Opération Carbet), in Haiti... Centre Spatial Guyanais Guiana Space Center.

*Chapter 0*

## Confined to a Nutshell

Now is the time

*Chapter 0*

## Rosemary for Remembrance

Now is the time

*Chapter 0*

## A Palpable Hit

Now is the time

*Chapter 0*

## Title

Now is the time



# ACT V

But earthlier happy is the rose distilled,  
Than that which, withering on the virgin thorn,  
Grows, lives, and dies in single blessedness.  
— Theseus, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* I.1.76-78

*Chapter 0*

Title

We opened

*Chapter 0*

Title

Now is the time

*Chapter 0*

Title

Now is the time

*Chapter 24*

Title

Now is the time