



Hamlet Lives Forever

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It is a perfect day in paradise. Paradise, as everyone knows, is an apple orchard on a bright spring morning. The air is warm, the sky is a shining blue. It is the first day of the year when you can feel the sun right through you. There are bees flying, and high up the first swallows have arrived. The trees are thick with apple blossom. You can smell its sweet green scent, and now you can hear a voice, the excited shout of a boy.

“Dad? Dad! It is you! Hurrah!”

That is Hamnet. Hamnet Shakespeare, 11 years old and bounding through the trees. He is running towards a man who has just walked in through the orchard gate. That man is Hamnet’s father, William Shakespeare.

“Hamnet? Hamnet? My darling, Hamnet! It is you! Oh, let me hold you. Oh, my beautiful boy...”

“Hello, Dad!” says Hamnet, “Isn’t it brilliant being dead?”

Unfortunately one has to die to enter paradise, as Hamnet knows. He died when he was only eleven years old. And now father and son are hugging tightly.

“Brilliant being dead, Ham?” Shakespeare says. “It’s quite a surprise. I don’t know what I was expecting but - Hamnet! It really is you?”

“Of course it’s me,” says the boy. “Did you miss me, Dad?”

William Shakespeare takes his young son’s hand. They sit down in the shade of a tree.



“Miss you, Hamnet? I missed you when I woke. I missed you while I wrote my plays. I missed you before I slept and I missed you in my dreams. I thought I would go wild with missing you. I had such feelings - I did not know what to do.”

“What *did* you do?”

“The only thing I could think of doing. I wrote a play for you.”

“Did they like it, Dad? Did they shout and cheer?”

“They loved it, Ham. Some said it was the greatest play the world has ever seen.”

“What is it called?”

“It’s called *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*.”

“But that’s not my name. My name is *Hamnet* Shakespeare.”

“So it is. I changed it because the play is *for* you, not *about* you. It’s about a man I thought of when I was thinking of you. A man a bit like the man you might have been.”

“Tell me the story, Dad!” Hamnet cries. “Tell it! Please?”

“Very well. Are you comfortable?”

“Yes, yes! How does it begin?”

“It begins in the castle of Elsinore, in Denmark, one dark and spooky night. Up on the battlements the sentries are nervous. They think they have seen a ghost.”

“A ghost! I love ghosts!” shouts Hamnet, clapping his hands.

“Good. Two nights running the sentries have seen the ghost of the old king, wearing his battle armour. They are terrified. They ask



Hamlet's friend Horatio to keep watch with them. And he sees it too. He brings Hamlet. The really scary thing is, the old king was Hamlet's father. It is his father's ghost, walking the battlements."

"What does Hamlet do?"

"He speaks with the ghost. After you died I longed to speak to you, you see. I spoke to you a lot, in my mind."

"Is Hamlet scared?"

"Oh yes, but he is very brave."

"What does the ghost say?"

"It says 'I am your father's ghost, Hamlet. I was murdered by your uncle Claudius, my brother, the man who now sits on the throne of Denmark, wearing my crown, married to my wife, your mother, Gertrude!' And the ghost says 'Your uncle Claudius murdered me when I was sleeping - he poured poison in my ear!'"

"Euch!" Hamnet exclaims, "Why did he do that?"

"He wanted to be king, Hamnet. And he wanted to marry Gertrude. The ghost says, 'Hamlet, avenge your poor murdered father! Kill Claudius!'"

"Does Hamlet get his sword, Dad?"

"No. He decides he needs proof. He does not believe in doing what ghosts tell you. You see, Hamlet believes in reason, in judgement - this is a modern young man at university, someone who thinks a lot. He is not going to kill someone just because a ghost says he should. So he puts on a play in which a king like Claudius kills his brother with poison in his ear and marries his brother's wife. Hamlet watches Claudius watching the play to find out what he will do when he sees it. If Claudius reacts then Hamlet will know that the ghost told the truth."



“What does Claudius do when he sees the play?”

“He shouts for lights! He panicks! He makes a great fuss and runs off. So Hamlet knows he is guilty.”

“So then Hamlet gets his sword?”

“He thinks about it. But he finds Claudius praying. He can’t kill Claudius in the middle of a prayer. And so he waits.”

“How long does he wait? When does he get his sword, Dad?”

“Well, first Hamlet goes to talk to his mother, Gertrude. He wants to know how she can bear to be married to Claudius, horrible Claudius. He gets very angry with Gertrude and shouts at her. In the middle of the row he hears a noise behind the curtain - there’s someone hiding there.”

“Horrible Claudius! Kill him!”

“That is what Hamlet thinks. He stabs his sword through the curtain, and he kills the hidden man - oof! Take that!”

“Hurrah! Dead Claudius!”

“Unfortunately not. It’s not Claudius behind the curtain. It’s Polonius. He falls down dead and bleeding.”

“Polonius? Who is Polonius?”

“Polonius is a friend of Claudius. He was spying on Hamlet.”

“Serves him right, doesn’t it Dad?”

“Maybe. You shouldn’t spy on people, but you probably shouldn’t stab people through curtains either. And now there is real trouble. Polonius is the father of Hamlet’s girlfriend, Ophelia. Hamlet has killed her father by mistake. It is too much for Ophelia. She drowns herself.”



“This is quite a sad story isn’t it?”

“Well, yes. I was feeling very sad when I wrote it, because of you. I thought I might go mad, I was so sad. But I wrote this play instead.”

“Why?”

“Because I liked thinking about you, and the kind of man you might have been. Not stabbing people through curtains, that’s just in the story. You seemed like a seed which would grow to be a great man, who believed in reading and thinking, and kindness, someone who understood that heaven and earth hold many mysteries, but that the mind, a good, clever mind, can understand them all.”

“Does Hamlet understand everything?”

“Not yet. He is sent away to England on a ship. But pirates attack the ship and Hamlet manages to escape and make his way back to Denmark. He arrives in time to see the funeral of Ophelia. Her brother Laertes and Hamlet fight over her grave. Remember, Hamlet has killed Laertes’ father, Polonius.”

“Laertes must be very angry with him,” Hamnet says, staring at his father.

“He is,” Shakespeare agrees. “And don’t forget horrible Claudius. Claudius knows Hamlet is after him. He knows Hamlet is ready to use his sword now. But when he sees how angry Laertes is with Hamlet, Claudius has an idea. He tells Laertes to have a sword fight with Hamlet, and use a poison sword. And just to make sure, he tells Laertes he will bring a cup of poison wine, and give it to Hamlet to drink. So we know that if Hamlet fights Laertes he will surely die.”

“Don’t fight, Hamlet!” cries the little boy. “Don’t do it, Hamlet!”

“That’s what his friend Horatio tells him.”

“What does Hamlet say, Dad?”



“He says if it is his time to die then so be it. And he says if it isn’t his time, his time will still come. So he decides to fight bravely, come what may.”

“Poor Hamlet!” says the little boy. “How can he win? Does he win? Say he wins, Dad. Please.”

William squeezes his son’s hand. “Well,” he says, “Yes. Hamlet does win, in a way. With everyone gathered to watch them, Laertes and Hamlet draw their swords. The fight begins. It is an almighty battle - and Hamlet fights brilliantly. But then the Queen, his mother Gertrude, drinks the poisoned wine by mistake, and she dies. Hamlet and Laertes fight and fight again. In their struggle they wound each other with the poisoned sword. And now Hamlet sees what has happened to his mother. He stabs Claudius, and makes him drink the poison too, and Claudius dies.”

“But what about Hamlet?”

“Laertes tells him he is going to die because of the poisoned sword. Laertes tells Hamlet he is very sorry, and Laertes dies. And now Horatio holds Hamlet, who is wounded and poisoned, and Hamlet says, Horatio, make sure you tell my story. And Hamlet says if he had time he could tell Horatio all the secrets of the world, because he has understood them now, but it is too late, the poison is quick, and Hamlet dies.”

“Poor Hamlet!”

“That’s what Horatio says. He prays that flights of angels will sing Hamlet to his rest.”

“And do they? Are there flights of angels?”

“Yes, you just have to imagine them.”

“Why did you make it so sad?”



“Because it’s a sad world, Ham, sometimes, isn’t it?”

“Yes. But - how does Hamlet win, if he’s dead? You said he won.”

Now William Shakespeare looks at his son. When he speaks his words are gentle.

“I said he won in a way, Ham. And so he does. Because this play I wrote for you will live forever. Hamlet will live forever. Every night in a theatre in some far off place, Hamlet will live and die again. Tomorrow, and tomorrow and every tomorrow until the end of the world someone will read *Hamlet*, or write about *Hamlet*, or act in the play of *Hamlet*. Is it not strange and wonderful that a man who never lived, a character in a play, is more alive than either of us? On Earth they know much more about Hamlet than they do about you or me.”

“So...does everyone know the words of the play, Dad?”

“Quite a few people seem to. ‘To be or not to be, that is the question’ - lots of people know that. And after he speaks with the ghost Hamlet says to his friend: ‘There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.’ That’s a famous one.”

Now young Hamnet is lying on his back under the apple tree, and studying the way the white blossom glows against the sky. He scrunches up his eyes. All this philosophy is hard work.

“What does that mean, Dad? There are more things in Heaven and Earth?”

His father lies back beside him in the grass, and he gazes up, too, into a blue sky that goes on forever. And William Shakespeare smiles.

“It means, dear Ham, that when I was writing the play and thinking

about you I knew that we die, but I was sure that goodness and truth do not. Kindness does not die. Great love goes on forever. Like the way I love you - that goes on for ever. Death and time are nothing compared to love. And the more I thought about all the things in earth and heaven, the smaller I felt. We are so clever, we humans, but we will never control the simplest things, like joy and grief, and love and death. And so what I thought was - everything may be true. If you believe in God, then there is God. If you believe that we meet again after death, then, for you, we do. In the play Hamlet wonders what happens after we die. Is it like a dream? Who knows? That was what I was thinking: will I ever see my Hamnet again? And so, all my hope and love and sadness, and all my joy, too, I put into that play, our play - the story of *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. Look at that shining sky! Who knows what is up there? I believe in things I have no words for, you see. And so does Hamlet, though he has as many words as anyone ever had.

Now, what do *you* believe in, Hamnet Shakespeare?"

Hamnet Shakespeare smiles, and points up into the tree above them.

"I believe in apples," he says.

THE END