

MATE

By Jerold London

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**Though justice be thy plea, consider this –
That, in the course of justice, none of us
Should see salvation: we do pray for mercy.
– Portia, The Merchant of Venice**

MATE

PLACE and TIME

Hôtel de Langeac, Paris.

1788.

CHARACTERS

THOMAS, male, tall, black, 45.

SALLY, female, white, 15.

LADY JUSTICE, dressed in white, blindfolded, with a sword in hand and a 6-foot self-supported replica of the scales of justice standing at her side.

... in the dialogue indicates a thoughtful break.

SCENE 1

Downstage center: Behind a scrim THOMAS and SALLY, in silhouette, remove the robes they are wearing and begin caressing.

SALLY jumps into the arms of THOMAS, wrapping her legs around his waist.

A knock at door of their hotel room.

She jumps down, and they hurriedly dress.

Darkness.

SCENE 2

In general darkness LADY JUSTICE enters, **stage right**, in a spotlight.

LADY JUSTICE

People, on balance, don't own their bodies. They lease them.

And unlike cats, who hide their final remains away, people generally leave their bodies to family, morticians, priests, or medical schools.

Sometimes to historians, with letters of instruction and final words.

This is *not to say* that people may be owned by others.

Justice abhors slavery. Justice holds these truths to be self-evident:

That all human beings, regardless of race, are endowed at birth with the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of their dreams.

Contrary to that law: Thomas, whom we just saw, age 45, owns Sally, age 15.

Does he own her love? I think not. Love is not owned; it is leased as well.

But desire? That's a different story.

People do own desire. And its consequences.

And honor and reputation.

They are owned, not leased. Lost, not stolen.

Forged by one's own efforts and suffering, not birthed by their mother's labor.

One thing more, before we return to our play's 45 and 15-year-old protagonists.

By day we are as others see us. At night we are ourselves.

But either way we are solitary creatures. We must own that fact and not let ourselves become paralyzed by loneliness.

For the indolence of loneliness is what causes human relationships to be repeated through history with such unspeakable monotony and boredom.

I am Justice. I stand for Justice. But does Justice stand for me?

**The scrim is drawn away. Light returns.
On the stage is projected: Paris, 1788.**

**Center stage: A chess table, chairs,
board, pieces, pens, and writing pads on
which the actors check off the moves as
made. If feasible, upstage, or at the sides
of the stage, are large screens on which
the chess moves are displayed for the
audience.**

**In a spotlight THOMAS appears, stage
left.**

THOMAS

[*entering*] Damn it! Don't you just hate being preached to?
When we die, what really is left?
I'll tell you: Questions.
What, if anything, did we accomplish? Were we honest about it?
Did we love? *Were* we loved?
Did we love our parents?
Did we love our children?
Did we love our church?
Did we have many friends? as if that matters.
Everyone, especially writers, are mostly solitary people.
Did we have the love of our life?
Did we have a person at the end whose tears of grief were sincere?
Or was it forbidden?

**SALLY enters, stage right, walks past
LADY JUSTICE, and proceeds to the
chess table.**

SALLY

Come, Thomas. People will little note your opening soliloquy.
What they want is your opening move.

**THOMAS joins her at center stage, they
shake hands, and then both sit.**

**THOMAS has the white pieces; SALLY,
the black.**

THOMAS

Pawn to King 4....
My lass, the world will little note nor long remember my opening moves.
But it will never let me forget my written words.

SALLY

Who won't? Historians?

THOMAS

Who? Civilization won't. It has never been in such a state of revolution.
All my words will be sliced and diced to sift out every possible meaning,
be it true or false.

SALLY

People don't understand you, you mean.

THOMAS

Not well at all.

SALLY

But you're a revolutionary hero.

THOMAS

My services for my country should out-tongue all possible complaints, indeed!
And yet

SALLY

People will hate you someday, won't they?
For having slaves ... and me.

THOMAS

What demerit that may seem to some, it pales before the liberty we have won.

SALLY

So you always say. Whether or not you tell me you love me.

THOMAS

Can you imagine my ever saying anything like that?

SALLY

If you do, you will. Pride of ownership aside.
Pawn to King 3.

THOMAS

Where did you learn that? Here in Paris?

SALLY

Yes.
They call it the French Defense.
Do you know it?

THOMAS

Time will tell.
Pawn to Queen 4.

SALLY

But will you?

THOMAS

Do you imagine you may tease me so?

SALLY

The days of our country's broil and battle are over.
It is the substance of what you say peacefully at home that matters now.
Pawn to Queen 4.

THOMAS

No surprise there.
Knight to Queen Bishop 3.

SALLY

Pawn to Queen Bishop 4.

THOMAS

Knight to Bishop 3.

SALLY

We hold these truths to be self-evident:
That all men are created equal.
You said that, correct?

THOMAS

Yes.

SALLY

Do you believe it?

THOMAS

Yes.
Except, maybe, at the piano.

SALLY

Except men, when they are woman, you mean.

THOMAS

What?

SALLY

Or when they are not of your race.

THOMAS

What?!

SALLY

Or are poor, or homeless.

THOMAS

What are you getting at, Sally?

SALLY

I'm talking about a deeper philosophy, not grounded on past habits and poor likelihoods.

THOMAS

Are you talking about yourself?

SALLY

I'm talking about a job half done.

THOMAS

Half done?!

SALLY

I'm talking about another revolution.
One that may take hundreds of years,
to wash a country's hands clean of sin.

THOMAS

Stop beating about the bush.
What are you talking about?

SALLY

Slavery.

THOMAS

Oh, slavery. Well, yes, that may take a few more years to get worked out.
What's your next move?

SALLY

Knight to Queen Bishop 3.

THOMAS

Does that bother you?...
Slavery?

SALLY

It does stand in the way of true love.

THOMAS

In what way?

SALLY

Enslaved love may be a form of love.... Forbidden love.
But what is love if it's not mutual?

THOMAS

Love is a point between a man and a woman where there is sex, and passion, and children.

Do you disagree?

SALLY

Did you love your wife?

THOMAS

Your sister?

SALLY

Yes, my sister, Martha. My dead sister.
Did you love her?

THOMAS

My God, yes, Sally.
I was devastated when she died.
This ... this pendant about my neck.
Do you see it?...
It contains a lock of her hair.
I promised Martha I'd keep it here for the rest of my life.

LADY JUSTICE

And he does.

SALLY

Tell me about her.

THOMAS

[*touching the pendant*] Martha was 23 when we married, and 33 when she died. Those were my light and carefree years. She read as avidly as I, couldn't live without books, and was a gifted pianist. We played duets together, myself on the violin or the cello. After Martha died, there were weeks of relentless riding on secluded roads, with daughter Patsy, the solitary witness to my bursts of grief.

SALLY

Was there passion between the two of you?

THOMAS

I won't speak of that.

SALLY

Is there passion when we make love?

THOMAS

More than I have ever known.

SALLY

Why?

THOMAS

Why?

SALLY

Have you ever asked yourself why?

THOMAS

No.

SALLY

Then I'll tell you why: I'm 15 and you're 45. I'm Martha's sister, and I'm forbidden by society.

THOMAS

Ah, yes. *Society*.
The dictates of which are cunning Hell.

SALLY

Slavery by another name.

THOMAS

But we must obey the time.... King pawn takes pawn.

SALLY

King pawn takes pawn.

THOMAS

Bishop to King 2.

SALLY

Knight to Bishop 3.

THOMAS

How else do you propose we stay together?
We are forbidden to wed, no matter what.
Feelings don't checkmate the law or society.

SALLY

I shall hold your visage in my mind.

THOMAS

That's no answer.

SALLY

If I stay in France they tell me I shall become a free woman.
You can visit me here.

THOMAS

You jest.

SALLY

No. 'Tis the law of France.

THOMAS

Strange.
Passing strange.

SALLY

I wish that heaven had made me such a man as you.
But still a woman, too.
I love you, Thomas, though you refuse those words to me.
I love that you do pity me and understand the mind I have.
Assuming a 15-year-old girl has a mind to understand such things.

THOMAS

All I ask is that with your help I can safeguard the solitude my home gives us.
A place where we can secrete what is hidden behind a beard of master and slave.

SALLY

You cannot have a secret love unless you tell me you love me.

THOMAS

I tell you, my heart races to think of you, but my mind sees infinite distances between us. What I *can promise*, of even greater value though, is a life where I shall be the guardian of your solitude as you are of mine.

SALLY

Then you must set me free.

THOMAS

When?

SALLY

When I am 31.

THOMAS

No.

SALLY

Then each child of ours, when they are 31.

THOMAS

I'll think about it.

SALLY

You must.

THOMAS

Win this game, and you have my word on that.

SALLY

Move, then.

THOMAS

I castle.

SALLY

Bishop to King 2.

THOMAS

Bishop to King Knight 5.

SALLY

I castle.

Pawn takes pawn.	THOMAS
	SALLY
Bishop to King 3.	
	THOMAS
Knight to Queen 4.	
	SALLY
Bishop takes Pawn.	
	THOMAS
Knight takes Bishop.	
	SALLY
Pawn takes Knight.	
	THOMAS
Bishop to Knight 4. That should give you some trouble.	
	SALLY
Queen to Queen 3.	
	THOMAS
Bishop to Rook 3.	
	SALLY
Queen Rook to King 1.	
	THOMAS
Queen to Queen 2.	
	SALLY
Bishop to Knight 5.	
	THOMAS
Bishop takes Knight.	
	SALLY
Rook takes Bishop.	
	THOMAS
Queen Rook to Queen 1.	

Queen to Bishop 4.

SALLY

Queen to King 2.

THOMAS

And where shall I sleep?
With you?

SALLY

God no!
What a question.
In your own, private quarters.
Under the South Terrace.
Why do you ask?

THOMAS

Because your attack is failing and you're going to lose this game.

SALLY

Do you think so?

THOMAS

Bishop takes Knight.

SALLY

Pawn takes Bishop.

THOMAS

Queen takes Queen Bishop Pawn.

SALLY

Rook takes Pawn.
I think you must have overlooked that.

THOMAS

Not quite.
Knight to Queen 5.

SALLY

[*pause*] Queen to Rook 5.

THOMAS

Queen Rook to King Bishop 1.

SALLY

THOMAS

Rook to King 5.

SALLY

Rook to Rook 3.

THOMAS

Queen to Knight 5.

SALLY

Rook takes Bishop.

THOMAS

Oh.

[*pause*] Rook to Queen Bishop 5. Now where is your Queen going?

SALLY

Queen to King Knight 6.

THOMAS

[*long, stunned pause*] My God!!! I have never seen such a move in my life. It's impossible. It's obscene. It's unnatural.

SALLY

If you capture my Queen with a Pawn, either one, it's immediate checkmate. You're forced, thusly, to capture with your Queen. But then I check with my Knight, capture your Queen with a second check, check your King a third time, and move my Rook to the other Rook 6 square, where your Queenside Pawns will fall like the Roman Empire.

THOMAS

And no stopping *your* Queenside Pawns from making you a new Queen.

SALLY

Who will then checkmate your King. It's only justice.

THOMAS

When justice becomes a dictator, it is the duty of the faithful to call out the truth.

SALLY

Chess *is* the truth.

THOMAS stands, studies the board a few moments, sweeps the pieces from it, and exits.

SALLY

You're no smarter a lover than the chess player you think you are, Thomas.
No idea how to love a woman who loves you.
Stupid man....
And when you die, I swear you'll fail to acknowledge what was the greatest thing
you ever had in your life.

**SALLY picks up the pieces and places
them back on the board.**

LADY JUSTICE

Did Thomas ever tell Sally he loved her?
Not that I ever saw.
But then, you know, I'm blind.
And, of course, they never got married.
[beat] Marriage and slavery share one thing in common, it strikes me.
You don't forget who you are until you fall asleep.

Another thing:
Thomas was indeed a solitary man.
And in their steal-away hours the two of them found many breathless moments.

She lived with him nearly 40 years a slave.
And was freed at his death.
Freedom was like water to her.
The memories, like water slipping through her fingers.

They had four children who were freed at age 31.
As he promised.
And all of them led prosperous and stable lives afterwards.

Now I ask you.
What difference does it make to say "I love you,"
when what you do says, "Your life matters"?

If you want to change the world, be with the days.
Be the instrument of things.
The rest of the matter lies in Mercy's hands.
Not Justice's.

END

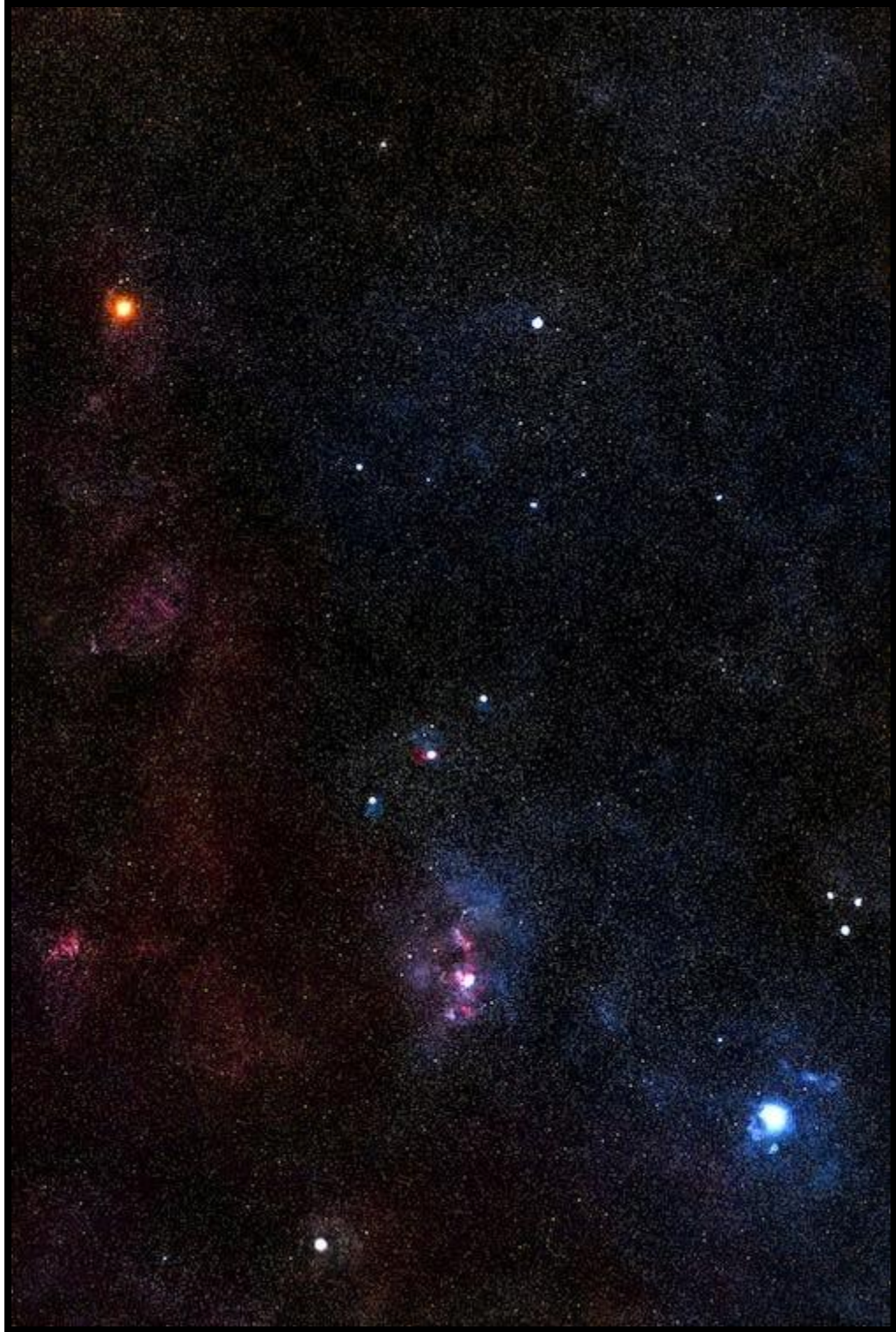


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**I myself am best when least in company.
– Duke Orsino, Twelfth Night**