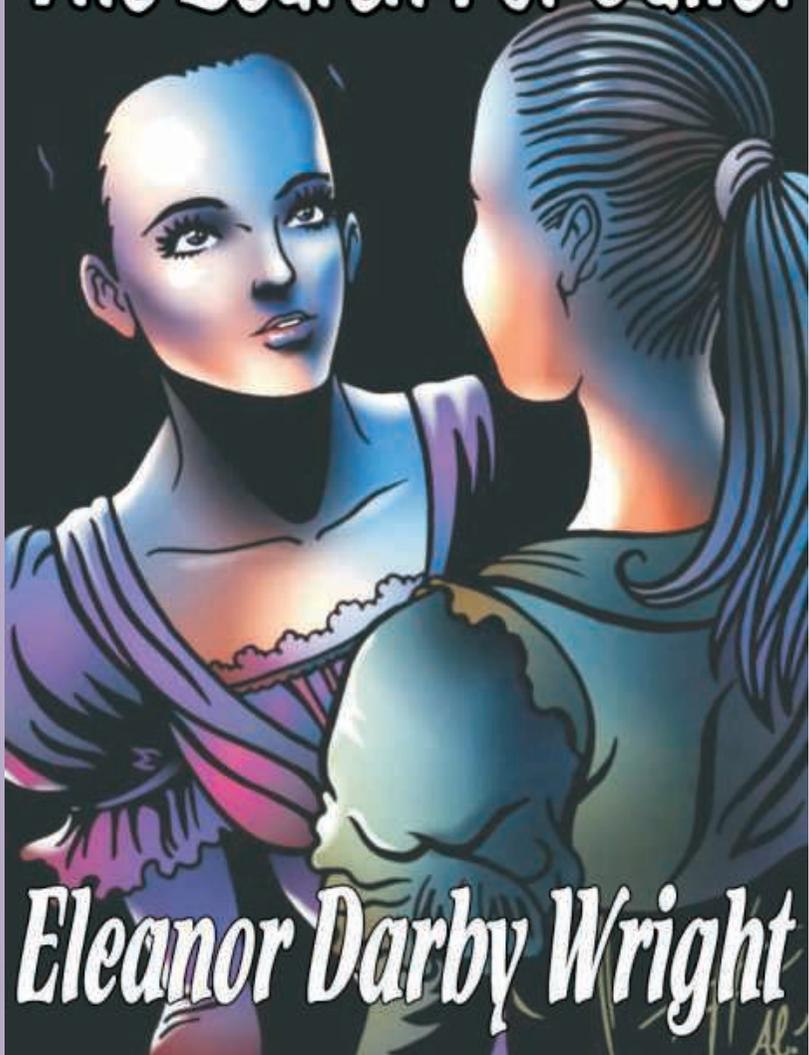


SHAKESPEARE COUNTY:

The Search For Juliet



Eleanor Darby Wright

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SHAKESPEARE COUNTY: THE SEARCH FOR JULIET

by Eleanor Darby Wright

Mrs Adams, the drama professor, singled four of us guys out after one of her classes on Shakespeare. "How would the four of you like to be in Shakespeare this summer?" she asked. "A week of rehearsal at scale and a week of performance at double that rate with a scholarship for the one chosen as Juliet at the end of the two weeks?"

Acting in a real production, acting in Shakespeare, acting for two weeks in a professional show, getting paid for acting, well, we were all smiling and nodding, she had us

all at that point, until the last part, 'chosen as Juliet', came out of her mouth.

"What, what do you mean, 'chosen as Juliet'," asked Darren, next to me. He still had something of a lisp in his voice and was constantly teased in the dorms about being gay. He just laughed that off but he was always the one to ask questions in class and so was noticed by everyone.

"Well, with all the gay parts in television these days," Jim 'Arnold' Schwartz said after one class. "Darren will never want for a job."

"He's welcome to those kind of parts," Frank Timmons had said to me as we had left the class together. Now, Frank, along with Gerry Bench, was sitting in the little theatre, part of the group that Professor Elizabeth Adams had singled out.

"Well, you all know that in Shakespeare's time," said the Professor, a smile on her unmade up face. Her blonde hair was pulled back in a sort of horse's tail down her back. She didn't wear much makeup and yet she always seemed womanly and attractive as she tried to coach us in the performance class we were all in.

"In Shakespeare's time," she went on patiently, waving to the next class to stay outside for a moment or two, "women were not allowed on the stage at all and so all the great female parts we study in class had to be played by men. Well, there is a place close to the university that you all must have seen on road signs, called Arden. It's in Shakespeare County and, guess what, they put on a Shakespeare Festival over the summer. An authentic Shakespeare Festival, I must add!"

"You want us to play female roles in Shakespeare?" asked Gerry then, stunned.

"You are all on the slender and on the small side," said Professor Adams with a smile, "which was how they

chose which actors would be male and which female in the theater of Shakespeare's time. Anyway, I was asked to recommend some actresses for the Festival and I have watched all four of you in class and feel you are all qualified."



"Please," lisped Darren then, standing up.

"If you are chosen to be Juliet in the final production of *Romeo and Juliet*," Professor Adams went on, "it's a twenty thousand dollar scholarship on top of any other monies you earn. But I have to tell you that the offer has been made, not only to the university, but to several other institutes of learning. This has been done before in Arden and they've never had less than twelve and as high as twenty actresses in Arden for their plays."

"They've done this before?" asked Darren then, sitting down again. "How come we haven't heard about this before?"

"Will you go around the school and tell the rest of the drama class the roles that you are going to play over the summer?" she asked dryly. I shuddered as I thought of what 'Arnold' would be calling me if he ever found out.

"I thought not," the professor smiled at us. "But it is a really good experience and almost all those who attend get jobs for the rest of the summer or in other Shakespeare productions. Well, I need to know by Monday if you want to go."

"Mrs Adams," said Frank quietly then. "This isn't the place where the guys in History One were, well ..."

"Encouraged by their girl friends to dress up and have a beauty contest with the boys dressed as girls?" said Professor Adams with a laugh. "Yes, this was the place. But they had nothing to do with the way that those poor boys were treated by this university three years ago.

"The village of Arden was quite supportive and understanding of what went on in that escapade. I can assure you that the Shakespeare Society, that runs the weeks and the plays, are very supportive of this university and they don't do anything to embarrass any of the actors from here who take part in authentic plays.

"I don't refer to it in my classes and I expect the same of you, unless you want to share with the others. I know some of the girls are fascinated by the insights you get being actresses for a week or so and those who have shared have always been most happy that they did."

The door rattled again and we all looked at one another, stunned by what she was asking of us, I'm sure.

"By Monday," she called to us all as she went to the classroom door to welcome the freshmen into another of her performance classes. She smiled broadly. "Let me know if any of you are man enough to do this!"

I didn't tell the others even when I saw each of them around the campus and they tried to pump me as I tried to pump them to find out if I'd be going to Arden alone. Mrs Adams had sent us all a video of an interview done by someone who had been in the Festival a few years before.

It began with a scene from *As You Like It*, set in Arden, naturally, and Rosalind and Celia are conversing about Celia's banishment and her resolve to find her exiled father in the Forest of Arden. Rosalind decides to accompany her and to disguise herself as a boy, as Ganymede, to protect Celia, now disguised as 'Aliena'.

It sent a few funny shivers up and down my back to watch Rosalind, her long blonde hair flowing down her back, try to act like a boy but still appearing to be a girl while Celia, dark and winsome, as Shakespeare might have said if he had seen 'her', seemed to be a pretty, elegant girl, clearly a daughter of a father, Duke Frederick, who has banished her.

I was absorbed by the scene as I watched it and disappointed when it suddenly cut off and there we were, in the video I had become absorbed in, in a dressing room of sorts, in an inn most likely, as the Tudor-style, black beams and whitewashed walls suggested. Rosalind was being interviewed on the part that she played.

“That is the hardest part,” ‘she’ was saying in a very upper-class Brit accent. “I am trying to project that I am Rosalind inside the boys’ clothes that I am wearing but I’m afraid that it just looks like me in a wig.”

“Oh no,” said the interviewer, a man I might add. “I was quite convinced that you were a girl throughout the play. Did you seek out this part as a girl dressed as a boy?”

“No,” said Rosalind with a smile of thanks at the praise. “I am the tallest of the actresses here this week, though, and there is that line in there when I talk about how tall I am and how I’ll protect Celia. No, if I had had a choice after a week in rehearsals, I’d have liked to have been Celia and disguised myself as a sluttish kind of girl as she does.”

Then, Rosalind did a terrible thing. ‘She’ took off her wig and began to wipe her face with a makeup remover. It only took a moment and ‘she’ was a boy, her hair standing on end slightly but clearly a boy’s hair.

“Well, Graham,” said the interviewer. Graham! I ask you! He should have called ‘Rosalind’, I thought. “You certainly performed very well in your part as you must have been able to tell by the extra special applause for you at the end of the play. Are you going to be in other plays this week?”

“Well, we’re all in *Romeo and Juliet*,” said Graham, his voice dropping to a regular guy’s voice, just like mine

normally. "We all, no matter our other parts, have to be part of the extended ball scenes."

"What's that like, dancing with a man as a partner?" cut in the interviewer then, an eagerness in his voice that I found a little off-putting.

"It's just acting," laughed Graham then, putting on an *Iron Maiden* tee shirt as the dress that he had been casting off slid away from him, revealing the tights he had been wearing. "It isn't as if a man has to hold me or anything."

"Yes, but I've noticed a lot of giggling and laughing in rehearsals," the interviewer went on.

"Well, we actresses, if I can use that word," said Graham with a grin, "like to be really funny about the dresses we wear and the rustling noises they make. So a lot of us take it in good part and answer the boys who tease us as if we were lords' daughters or something. It makes the dancing fun and I hope that you will all enjoy it when you see it. I know we'll be enjoying ourselves."

The interview cut then to a 'news desk'. I don't know if it was real or not but there was another serious-faced man thanking Arthur for his interview with Graham Belson, Rosalind in *As You Like It*. He promised other interviews later with the actors who had played Orlando and Celia, they weren't on the tape, and then gave out a series of dates and times when other plays were being produced in the Globe Tent Theater, weather permitting.

I played the tape through twice and then it hit me where I had seen Graham Belson before. In my first year at university, he had been in *Waiting For Godot*, the play put on by third and fourth year members of the performance classes at our university. I had never seen him around campus and so I had presumed that he had left after that play. As I recalled now, he had been very good and had had a good write-up in the student newspaper.

"Is Graham Belson around?" I asked Mrs Adams when I took the videotape back to her on Tuesday. We had had an extension on her deadline.

"Not around here," Mrs Adams said with a big smile. "He's a professional actor now and has a couple of films coming out at the end of this year, with good supporting parts for someone just starting out. He's done a lot of television work as well, you know, but the Shakespeare Society Arden Festival, a real mouthful, isn't it, was his first professional gig and he did very well even though he wasn't Juliet."

"Who was then?" I asked.

"The actor, I should say actress, that's the way the Festival distinguishes who is playing the male roles and who the female," said Mrs Adams. "The actress who played Celia actually was chosen for Juliet. It's a pity that you couldn't see the whole play rather than a snippet. I have asked but that appears to be all that they have taped. Well, Murray Dangerfield, are you in for this year or are you out?"

Yes, Murray Dangerfield used to be my name. Of course I had to change it when I became a professional actor and headed to Los Angeles. But right then, I was still at university and that was my name, even though it made people smile whenever they saw it.

"Well, it gets you noticed, Rodney," said Jim Schwartz once when we were all discussing what names we would have when we 'made it'.

"Just like yours, Ar-nold," I said to him in my Schwarzenegger voice and everybody roared with laughter. Well, for the whole of this last year, I had been called 'Rodney' by everyone and Jim had been 'Ar-nold'.

"I, I think I'd like to try it," I said to Mrs Adams and she nodded.

"You will do well, like Graham," she said then. "You do understand how much you will be paid, don't you? Scale will be fifteen hundred for the first week and three thousand for the second, and if you do interviews or promos for the plays, and it is expected, you will be paid for those, at minimum a hundred a time, as everyone knows you are all starving actors. But food and boarding quarters are supplied and that is a saving. Now some other conditions."

I looked worriedly at her. Wow, nearly five thousand dollars. I would only have to work half time at the convenience store or gas bar to be able to afford my last year of college. I didn't mind minimum wage jobs which were all that we could get around Barrington, the university town. They allowed me to survive but the Arden gig would allow me to save, to pay my fees, buy my books and even have something left over as well as giving me a start on my resume. I just hoped the latter would be something that I would be proud to be able to say that I had done. Well, it hadn't hurt Graham Belson, had it? He was working now as an actor, Mrs Adams had said, and maybe I could follow in his footsteps.

"The other conditions," said Mrs Adams with a slight smile, jolting me back to reality. "One, you mustn't cut your hair again. In case you didn't notice, I didn't select any skinheads in this group. You'll find it much easier to attach hair pieces than always being in hot, heavy wigs under stage lights.

"Two, shaving. Well, it should be obvious, no beards or mustaches. Girls didn't have them, even in Elizabethan times. But you shouldn't shave your face at all. What you have do is to take this package that I am giving you and use the wax on your face two or three times before you go to Arden.

“Three, voice. There is a tape by a couple of transwomen in the package. Transwomen are women who were once men and changed their sex. Believe me, they know everything about how to find a natural, female register to talk in.” I looked at her in alarm as Professor Adams went on. “In Elizabethan times, boys who played the girls would have started before their voices broke and would have sounded like women. You have to make an attempt at doing that. Lessons in the first week will help you but it’s better if you have practiced and tried to speak as a woman for some time.

“Four,” she smiled at my consternation then. “A British accent. Graham Belson was from Mississippi, if you can believe, and had a terrible, Southern accent. Even in *Waiting for Godot*, we had to coach him for hours and eventually he tried an Irish accent and that worked for him, replacing one strong accent with another.

“Now you,” the professor smiled at me, “should have no trouble. I’ve heard you many times in class doing snooty Englishmen. Well, snooty, English women don’t speak that differently, do they? So practice, read, and here.”

Beside the package she gave me, she also gave me an envelope. I opened it and gaped at her, stunned. Inside was a check made out to me for two thousand dollars. It was from The Shakespeare Scholarship Fund and was signed by a Thomas E Johnson and Ralph Dunley. I had heard of him. He was a professor in Archaeology, I think.

“These people are Shakespeare lovers,” said Professor Adams. “They know how poor many of our students are and this is to pay you for practice. I must tell you as well that if you turn up in Arden and it is obvious that you haven’t practised or are still shaving, you will not be considered for parts in the plays that are put on. You will in fact be booted out of town.”

"Who, who," I gulped, "are these people to do this for us? Are they, are they ...?" I wanted to say 'perverts', men who were into drag queens or female impersonators or something like that.

"Tom Johnson," said Professor Adams sharply, dispelling the uneasy feeling I had then about how I was being lured into being an 'actress', "used to lecture in History here at this university. He promoted a hands-on approach which meant working at the notorious dig that ended up, after it was done for the year, with the dressing up.

"It all began innocently, you know, when Tom wasn't even there in Arden. The students all had too much too drink and it was a warm day, I gather, and so the girls began putting earrings and makeup on the sleeping boys. And that led to the events that you've heard about and why men no longer sign up for History as a major. No-one wants to be labelled after the shenanigans of that affair. Well, Tom and Ralph are both married now and feel they should give something back to Arden and to the people involved who always treated them so well and did in this case as well. They collect money every year to help student actors. You might even meet them and their wives if you are lucky."

Two thousand dollars. Well, if they didn't want me, I would have a little profit anyway.

"You think that you can meet those conditions that I laid down to you?" asked Professor Adams with that beautiful smile of hers again.

"I think so," I said. Well, I didn't want to tell her but I hardly shaved as it was. I only had a few hairs around my chin that needed to be done.

"Now, the senior plays, *Death of a Salesman*, and *The Odd Couple*. You will understudy the card players in *The Odd Couple* and work the house in the other plays," Pro-

fessor Adams went on, disappointing me that I wasn't going to be Oscar Madison or Willie Loman, though the roles did call for a stage presence that I had to work at to project.

"I'd like you to do a favor for me as well, Murray," Elizabeth Adams went on strongly then, "and read the Partridge Sister parts in *The Odd Couple*. They are British and no, I wouldn't ask you to take the part on stage. I want you to track the girls who have the roles and we can discuss what they do well and what they should be doing. I would like to read the parts with you in our tutorials if we have the time but the term is racing to an end now and I don't seem to have the time to do everything that I set out to do this year for myself."

Well, I did get on stage twice with *The Odd Couple* in different parts and Professor Adams was there to tell me how well I had done. She also told me that she wished that I could have been one of the Partridge Sisters as well as she found the girls in the parts so strident and 'over the top'.

"You and I should have been the Sisters," said the professor as I met her for the one-on-one tutorial that was a feature of the performance classes at Barrington. We went through the scenes again and Professor Adams played back the scene, which made me hot all over as I listened to the two of us. It did sound like two women talking, the voice lessons I had studied assiduously clearly paying off.

Professor Adams wasn't totally pleased with me. She found many errors in my pronunciation. "No, a woman doesn't say it like that," she would point out constantly to me and make me do it her way. Then, we would record again and sometimes I would lose my 'female' voice and Professor Adams would shut down completely.

"Well," she said after my last class in the last week of the term. "So, you have a month of rest and then I shall see you in Arden for the assessment. I am sure that you will pass."

I shuddered. "Am I the only one from here going to the Festival?" I asked her nervously.

Elizabeth Adams smiled at me impishly. "You should know," she said. "Haven't you asked the others if they are going as well as you?"

"They won't tell me," I said. I didn't actually phrase my question as Professor Adams had. I didn't say 'as well as me' to the others. Yes, I was still a little embarrassed when I thought about it. Two weeks in nothing but female roles in plays. I shivered a little when I thought about it. And I thought about the reviews I might get and I really didn't know which would be the best review, that I was convincing in the part or that I wasn't.

"Then I won't tell you, either," laughed Professor Adams as the hope that she would enlighten me vanished. "How are you getting to Arden by the way?"

"There must be a bus," I said unsteadily.

"It stops on the highway outside Arden," said the Professor. She scribbled on her writing pad. "I will make arrangements for someone to pick you up on the Sunday before your week begins in the afternoon if I can get someone. That will give you a chance to get settled before rehearsals begin at nine sharp on Monday morning."

"Do you have a schedule of what we do in that week?" I asked her.

"Only in general terms," smiled Professor Adams. "It will depend largely on where we are with the conditions that you were supposed to meet and how well they have been met by all fourteen of our actresses."

"Fourteen?" I gasped.

"Oh yes," said Professor Adams. "The Festival is very popular in quarters outside Barrington but I like to believe that my students in the end will be the ones competing for the role of 'Juliet' on the last day of the second week."

Two weeks to get a Shakespeare play ready for production? I didn't see how that could be. Just learning the lines was going to be quite a chore.

"Yes," agreed Professor Adams with a wry smile. "You can start reading through the part. If you are chosen in the last three, four, five actresses, whatever the director wants to do this year, you will be ahead, I would think, if you already know your part. Tape yourself as well and listen as we have been doing to the Partridge Sisters. There's nothing wrong with too much preparation, is there?"

The last mocking phrase was one of hers that Professor Adams often used in our classes, usually to the group that was woefully under-rehearsed and was making a mess of whatever scene that was supposed to be presented.

I was picked up on the first Sunday morning in June by Professor Tom Johnson and his wife, Davina. She was a devastatingly beautiful woman and Tom Johnson couldn't keep his hands off her which I wouldn't have been able to, either, if she had been my wife.

When his pickup parked at the entrance to the dorm, not knowing who he was at first, I saw him run around the truck and open the door and this blonde-haired woman got out. He had her in his arms almost right away

and was kissing her and she was kissing him and I wanted to call out, "Why don't you get a room?" to the pair of them.

The blonde girl in the high, high heels was the one to stop her amorous husband and direct him towards the dorms where I was waiting. As soon as I saw her, I knew that I had seen her before somewhere and then the wind blew her hair across her face and I knew that I had seen that look and that smile before in our local newspaper. Yes, she was a model of some kind and she was featured so often and no wonder. She was so gorgeous and her figure looked so great in a bikini. Yes, that was where I had seen her last. In the 'reading' material that was in the men's washroom. I had seen her in the swimsuit catalogue, in a bikini, on the front cover.

Please don't ask me why that catalogue was there, along with several *Playboys*, *Hustlers* and the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit edition. Let's just say that men spend a little more time in the bathroom than women and we like to look at beautiful women. Put the two together and you might understand why the catalogue with Davina smiling on the cover in her black bikini, her arms wrapped around her shapely legs, was one of the most 'borrowed' items from the magazine rack in our dorm.

The couple came through the door and several of the guys who were in there for summer classes stood gawking at the woman who looked around as her husband nuzzled her neck.

She looked in my direction and said then, "Murray Dangerfield?" in the sweetest of soprano voices. Umm, she made me feel all hot and bothered inside, just looking at her.

"Yes," I said. "Mr and Mrs Johnson?"

The rings on her ring finger glinted as she waved her hand at me and smiled. "See!" she said to her husband, his arm encircling her waist as he possessively held her. "I told you that university men are much more observant than archaeologists!"

I thought then of the wild things that I had heard about Tom Johnson and the History of Archaeology class that had ended up, or so it seemed, with almost all the guys dressing like girls and continuing to do so after they got back to campus. Some were even supposed to have become sorority members while others had slept with other guys on campus as if they were girls. The stories were so wild, I didn't believe any of them, really, as they were often so completely contradictory.

"Wow!" said Tom Johnson then, looking at all the stuff I had gathered about me. "Is all this stuff going with you to Arden?"

"I have to take it with me," I told him. "This was my last day here in residence. Next year, I'll have to find a new place."

"And over the summer," asked Tom Johnson sympathetically, "you'll just crash with friends?"

"I have to," I said defensively. "That's why I asked Professor Adams if anyone doing a pick-up had a pickup as well."

Tom Johnson grinned at me, squeezed his wife and she smiled at me as well. I felt my legs turning to jelly as she did that. I definitely would have had my arm about her if I was Tom Johnson.

"Well, let's get going," said Tom Johnson and because Davina was there, we had all kinds of help from the dorm's male residents to bring the stuff I had out to the pickup truck. Davina smiled and thanked everyone prettily and so we got into the truck, me in the back seat.