

Something Rotten!

Side 1: WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

SHAKESPEARE

So! Nigel. What are you and that brother of yours working on? A tragedy? A comedy? A tragic attempt at comedy? *(to the crowd)* See what I did there? *(THEY don't laugh enough)* SEE WHAT I DID?? *(THEY laugh harder.)*

NIGEL

Actually, Nick doesn't want me to tell anyone.

SHAKESPEARE

Oh, God, he's so paranoid. Always has been. Even when I was a lowly actor in his sad little troupe, he was so *insecure*. Of course, with you as his partner, he has even more reason to be. I've read your sonnet. *(HE puts a hand on Nigel's shoulder, nods like "yeah, that's right, I read it.")* NIGEL waits for a comment. SHAKESPEARE finds a bit of dust on Nigel's coat, flicks it off. Nigel is in agony, waiting.) It's good. Quite good. I'd love to read more. *(feigning surprise)* Oh-is that your folio? *(HE points to Nigel's leather notebook).*

NIGEL

What, this? Oh, this is just-a collection of random lines and thoughts ...

SHAKESPEARE

Would you like me to give it a looky-loo? What am I saying? Of course you would! I'm Shakespeare!

CROWD

(singing, raising a glass) SHAKESPEARE!

SHAKESPEARE

(takes Nigel's notebook, reads) Hmm... "All the world's a stage." Good line, that. *(There's a commotion the door as SHYLOCK and NICK enter. SHAKESPEARE steps away, flipping through pages.)*

DOORMAN

Hey, you're not allowed in here ... *(DOORMAN tries to stop them.)*

SHYLOCK

It's okay he's my plus one ...

NICK

Trust me I have no desire to stay... (*backing into the room*) ...I'm just looking for my ...
(*seeing Nigel*) Brother! There you are! Why the hell are ... oh, hello Will.
(*SHAKESPEARE hides the notebook behind his back.*)

SHAKESPEARE

Hello, Nick. Been a long time.

NICK

Not long enough. Is that. .. my brother's *notebook*? (*takes it from him*) Nice try.

NIGEL

He was just offering to look at my ideas.

NICK

Or *his* ideas as they'd soon be known.

CROWD

Ooohhh.

SHAKESPEARE

Do you bite your thumb at me sir? (*CROWD laugh and lightly applaud.*)

NICK

Really? Quoting *Romeo and Juliet*? Pathetic.

SHAKESPEARE

By my troth, the tartness of his face doth sour the ripened grape.

CROWD

HA-HA-HA-HA-HA

NICK

Oh yeah? Well, by my troth your grape ... is stupid. (*NICK instantly winces at what he said, wishing he could take it back.*)

SHAKESPEARE

Such a clever retort, and you can't write a hit?

CROWD

Oooooooh... (More LAUGHTER at Nick's expense. HE'S fuming.)

SHAKESPEARE

No, no, no, no, no, no ... we should actually thank this man. He was the one who suggested I take up writing in the first place.

NICK

'Because you're a shit actor.

SHAKESPEARE

Oh no I'm not!

NICK

Oh yes you are!

SHAKESPEARE

Oh no I'm not!

NICK

Oh yes you are!

SHAKESPEARE

Take it back.

Side 2: PORTIA and NIGEL

(NIGEL steadies himself.)

NIGEL

Yes, you can. Yes, you can. *(HE sits, tries to write)* Uggggh, no you can't. *(HE stands to leave and is blocked by A WOMAN IN A CLOAK–PORTIA.)* Oh. Good day, mistress.

PORTIA

"Good days were those when lit with love, till dusk of death did herald th'eternal night."

NIGEL

Hey-I wrote that.

(The WOMAN lowers her hood, revealing herself to be PORTIA.)

PORTIA

Yes, I know. *(holding up a page)* I accidentally took this after our first encounter. Your sonnet. It's—perfection.

NIGEL

Really? You thought it was...good?

PORTIA

It ... touched me in places I did not know could be touched. *(PORTIA suddenly realizes how that sounded, turns away—embarrassed.)* Forgive me. Poetry is forbidden in my house, especially poems of earthly love. *(melodramatically; to the heavens)* OH, IS THERE NO PITY SITTING IN THE CLOUDS THAT SEES INTO THE BOTTOM OF MY GRIEF?!

NIGEL

Romeo and Juliet, Act 3, Scene 5.

PORTIA

You've seen it?

NIGEL

Six times, and you?

PORTIA

Eight! If my father knew, he would disown me.

NIGEL

My brother, too.

PORTIA

I adore Shakespeare.

NIGEL

Me, too! I've got a Comedy of Errors, first edition.

PORTIA

I've got Sonnet number 1. Signed!

NIGEL

Wow!

PORTIA

I know! Heh-heh, heh-heh ...

NIGEL

Heh-heh, heh-heh ... *(THEY giggle together; nerdy, awkward laughs and snorts. Then...weakly)* That's awesome.

PORTIA

I think you're his equal—if not better.

NIGEL

What??? No way.

PORTIA

Oh yes. Your sonnet has Shakespearean sophistication mixed with the complexity of Daniel Webster and the sensitivity of Samuel Daniel.

NIGEL

Wow. You really love poetry.

PORTIA

Oh, I do. I really, really do.

Side 3: NOSTRADAMUS

NOSTRADAMUS

Did I hear a need for future seeing? *(The window closes. We hear footsteps on stairs, then falling, pots and pans, a cat SCREECH, then a door opens, and Nostradamus steps out.)* If seeing is what you need, then I can help you. If help is what you need, then I can see you. If neither is what you need, then I can foresee you leaving very shortly. So—am I hired? Actually, I know I will be, I'm just being polite.

NICK

Who are you?

NOSTRADAMUS

I—am Nostradamus.

NICK

THE Nostradamus?

NOSTRADAMUS

No. I'm his nephew. Thomas.

NICK

Thomas Nostradamus?

NOSTRADAMUS

(raising his hand as if giving oath) I promise. But I share the same gifts as my esteemed uncle. And for half a crown, I'll share those gifts with you. And I predict for you a new life...with no teeth! That was a freebie.

NICK

Uhhh ... I'll keep looking if you don't mind.

NOSTRADAMUS

Suit yourself. *(getting a vision, then eerily)* But beware the sign of the black dog.

NICK

Right. Thank you. Good luck in the asylum. *(NOSTRADAMUS goes one way, NICK goes the other. A PUB SIGN shifts and falls, stopping just before hitting Nick on the head. It says "TfIE BLACK DOG." (or-a MAN walks past carrying a sign, nearly hit Nick*

with it. When the man turns, we can see the sign says "BLACK DOG PUB")) Half a crown you said?

(NOSTRADAMUS returns as NICK pays him.)

NOSTRADAMUS

Excellent! Now—what is it you would like the future to tell?

NICK

Well, I'm a writer—

NOSTRADAMUS

I knew that.

NICK

... and I want you to look into the future and tell me... *(checks to make sure no one's listening)* What will the next big thing in theater be? —what audiences will be lining up to see.

NOSTRADAMUS

Right. Stand back. Give me some space. *(He shakes out and warms up like an athlete before an event, then more hacking and clearing his sinuses, then squints hard and puts his fingers to his temples. He squints—then gets the shivers.)* Oh. Oh my. Wow. Ooooh, in the future, the theaters are very *niiiiice*. Cushy red seats. AND A ROOF! And wait! .. whoa, what is this?? It's UNBELIEVABLE!

NICK

What? What?!

NOSTRADAMUS

That much?? For a glass of wine?!?!

NICK

How about what's on the stage?

NOSTRADAMUS

Right. Getting to that... *(HE squints, then gets a vision that causes him to stumble backwards. NICK has to catch him.)* Whoa! What spectacle! I have seen the future!

NICK

What, what is it??!

NOSTRADAMUS

The biggest, most fantastic thing in theater will be... (*painting it in the air*) MUSICALS.

NICK

What?

NOSTRADAMUS

(*painting it again*) Musicals.

NICK

What the hell are "musicals?"

NOSTRADAMUS

(*squinting into the distance*) It appears to be a play where the dialogue stops and the plot is conveyed through song.

NICK

Through song?

NOSTRADAMUS

Yes.

NICK

Wait, wait. So—an actor is saying his lines and then, out of nowhere, he just starts *singing??*

NOSTRADAMUS

Yes!

Side 4: NICK and NIGEL

NICK

You know the big idea we're looking for? Well, I've got it.

NIGEL

You have?

NICK

Yes. Now, I want you to listen with an open mind because it's a bit radical.

NIGEL

Okay. What is it?

NICK

(painting it in the sky) A MUSICAL. *(NIGEL looks confused)* It's a play with songs - but the songs advance the plot and develop character as they seamlessly segue from dialogue into singing.

(NIGEL thinks about it for a beat.)

NIGEL

That. .. is ... the most. .. amazing idea.

NICK

Yeah?

NIGEL

It's *brilliant* actually. How better to express the inner longings of the human soul than with music? And you're always writing songs on your lute.

NICK

I already dusted it off and started banging out a few tunes. And all those poems of yours?--there's your lyrics!

NIGEL

Wow. It's perfect for us. How did you come up with this?

NICK

(quickly diverting question) That's--not important. 'But this is good, right?

NIGEL

Yeah. "A MUSICAL." I *love* it.

NICK

We just need to figure out what it's about.

NIGEL

I still say we should tell our...

NICK

Please don't say two brothers from Cornwall.

NIGEL

But why not? I think we should just write something emotionally true, something from the heart.

NICK

No! We need to think bigger. Was the Bible written from the heart?

NIGEL

Well, I would hope so.

NICK

Okay, it probably was but my point is--Matthew, Mark, Luke? Those writers were writing about an event. Something big, epic, *world-changing*. (*suddenly hit with an idea*) I've got it! Yes! Why didn't I think of this before?

NIGEL

What?!

NICK

The most significant historical event in the last thousand years!

(LIGHTS OUT on them and up on the TROUPE who appears on the stage behind them.)

Side 5: BROTHER JEREMIAH

BROTHER JEREMIAH

Brethren, I say unto thee...the theaters are a scourge upon our land! Where men dress as women and kiss other men. I have seen it myself and it did *stiffen* my...resolve! (*HE furrows his brow, what did I just say?, then moves on*) For such sinful role-play is the gateway to lustful desires and fantasies of the flesh!

NICK

You really want that guy giving a speech at your wedding reception?

BROTHER JEREMIAH

(*pointed, towards Nick and Nigel*) Let not thy sacred soul be poisoned by the playwrights and poets whose dark invention diverts simple minds from the one true book... (*as HE is exiting, effctely to his men*) C'mon, boys.

Side 5: BEA and NICK

(NICK enters. NIGEL is at the table eating from a bowl. BEA is at the cast iron kettle over the fire.)

NICK

Hello, darling. How was your day? *(THEY kiss.)*

BEA

Interesting. I went to the stocks and watched the mob throw cabbages at the criminals.

NICK

What'd you do that for?? You hate all that!

BEA

I know, it was awful. *(handing him a bowl)* Boiled cabbage?

NICK

Ah. I see.

NIGEL

I think it's delicious.

BEA

Aw, thanks Nige. There would've been meat, but the landlord came by demanding the rent—took our last shilling right out of my hand. Then I was gonna surprise you with some mutton—but sheep are *fast*.

NICK

Wait, wh—you chased a SHEEP? Alright, that's it. *(HE pushes away from the table and heads f0r a WOODEN LOCKBOX on the mantle.)*

BEA

What are you doing?

NICK

I'm just... *(HE grabs the money box. SHE quickly takes it away.)*

BEA

No! We've been through this, we do not touch the money box! *(SHE puts it back.)*

NICK

Come on, Bea ... we shouldn't have to live like this. You deserve better.

BEA

And so do you--we all do, and that's what we're saving for. A better life. A simple cottage in the country, for all of us. You, me, a couple of kids ... (*taking money back, passing Nigel*) ...a room for Nigel and maybe his *wife* one day ...

NIGEL

(*embarrassed*) Oh, stop it...

BEA

Now, I know it's been a while since we've put any money in there, and that's why I was thinking—I should get a job.

NICK

What? No, if you get a job, that will just make me feel like a failure. None of the other writers' wives have jobs.

BEA

Well, they should. This is the nineties! We've got a woman on the throne and by the year 1600, women will be completely equal to men. Ooh! I just thought of the perfect job for me. I could be in your play!

NICK

What?? You can't act. (*SHE BURST INTO TEARS, covers her face with her hands.*)
Sorry, I didn't mean to hurt your feelings.

BEA

Gotcha. See I can act.

NICK

You know it's *illegal* to put women on stage.

NIGEL

And anyway, our plays been cancelled.

BEA

What?

NICK

Not *cancel*ed, Nige. That's such a negative way to put it. (*firing him a look*) I mean, yes, we are no longer doing Richard the Second but only because we've come up with ... a *better idea*.

BEA

Oooh, what is it?

NICK

Can't say. Don't want to jinx it.

BEA

So ... there is no idea.

NICK

Well, we've had the idea... (*HE motions to Nigel, help me out here...*)

NIGEL

... that we need an idea.

(*NICK gives Nigel a "what the hell was that" shrug?*)

BEA

Then let me help you! I'll go out and earn some money and that'll take the pressure off you guys.