

ASK EZEKIEL
A Ten Minute Play

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The present. Bare stage. BILLY (male, 18) alone, in a pool of light, speaking to the rest of his video class. He holds several cards lettered like TV studio cue cards (a device he's rather pleased with). A deep breath, then—

BILLY

Okay, so here goes. *(Holds up first card.)* “My Dad, His Mission, and My Good Deed”—which is the title of my video—*(Second card.)* —by Billy Ireland. Who would be me. And the reason why I made my video is to maybe save my butt after I didn't graduate because I flunked just about every class I took this year. *(Stage whisper to teacher, off to one side.)* So a B would be awesome if you could swing it, Mr. Pfei [pronounced “fie”]. Um, okay.

Awkward silence.

(Laughs.) So this is hard, summarizing everything.

Awkward silence.

No, okay, so the cast of characters. First there's me, who you know. Then there's my hero, honest, and also my inspiration for *(Points this out on first card.)* MY GOOD DEED: Thomas Chatterton. Thomas was also one of the reasons I got flunked because I wrote my paper on him for Mrs. Doyle, who had made it *(Mrs. Doyle voice)* abundantly clear everyone's paper was to be about one of the Great Romantic Poets, and no, Billy, proto-Romantics are not allowed, thank you very much, much less boy-poets. Which is the trouble I have with school, if you don't mind saying, Mr. Pfei. Everybody just wants you to puke up the same old puke.

Oh wait, no first really there's *(Points this out on first card.)* MY DAD, who has this theory that the *true* author of Shakespeare's plays was the Earl of Oxford—

Holds up card with picture of Oxford. Makes the sound of a crowd cheering. Waves card like a placard at a political convention.

—not that *(Dad voice)* “semi-literate seller of malt from the provinces.”

Holds up picture of Shakespeare, defaced to look like Snidely Whiplash. Hisses.

My dad always says that like he's smelling something really bad. *(Smelling something*

really bad.) “Semi-literate seller of malt from the provinces.” Anyway—

Holds up Oxford. As if to slow learners.

Earl of Oxford, *true* author of Shakespeare. Remember that. Cause it’s important.

Okay, then there’s Vincent, who—hmm, how to describe Vincent? Did you ever pick up a friend kind of like stepping in gum on a sidewalk? I mean, I like him and everything, and I shouldn’t make fun of him, which I have to admit I do because he’s always quoting Van Gogh or the Bible. Which there’s nothing wrong with because he wants to be (*Vincent voice*) “a shepherd, like my Pa,” as he says. Anyway, he’s really not part of the video, so I’m gonna edit him out. But I just thought I’d mention him.

Anyway, we’re in England because my Dad’s on this (*Indicates on first card.*) MISSION to find something, a document, that will prove once and for all that Oxford—

Holds up Oxford. Briefly, sound of crowd cheering.

—is the *true* author of Shakespeare’s plays. He’s been saving for this trip since I was, I don’t know, like eight. Bless his heart, darn it. It was supposed to be, you know, I turn eighteen, I *graduate*, he gets to be like all “Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, free at last!” Which I just so totally frigging screwed up.

So what happened was that me and Thomas were talking and—oh, wait, first let me tell you about this poem Thomas is writing. It’s called “The Battle of Hastings” and it starts:

O Christ, it is a grief for me to tell,
How many a noble earl and val’rous knight
In fighting for King Harold nobly fell
All slain in Hastings field in bloody fight.
And of his knights did eke full many die,
Of poignant arrows, tipped with destiny.

Boy, I’ll tell you, that last line “poignant arrows, tipped with destiny,” it just like pierced my very heart. I mean, this is stupid, but you know how you feel you have this . . . — (*Can’t find the word; tries to say it with a gesture.*) —inside you? Which people can

never see. So they scoff. Because they can't believe there's something in you that's, I don't know—*something*. Big, endless, bottomless. Crying out. Aimed right at you. Tipped with destiny. And it's just so darn frigging hard—like with my Dad—when you don't even know what it is yourself. You know?

Okay, that's dumb. I'll shut up.

Anyway, so me and Thomas were talking—and I have to tell you this sad thing, because I don't want it to come as a surprise and upset you, which is that Thomas killed himself when he was only 17 years, 9 months, and 6 days old.

The wind goes out of his sails for the briefest moment.

But Thomas told me once— (*Fumbles to retrieve paper*) —I wrote it down— (*Reads.*) “’Tis why I live”—He really talks that way— (*Makes him smile.*) —“’Tis”. It's right on the video if you don't believe me. “’Tis why I live, to give voice to my Voice, whose every syllable brings Amazement. Am I not an angel with wings and a trumpet, Billy?” And life just crushed him. I mean, once we were talking and he wrote “mutton” on a piece of paper and ate it because he had nothing to eat, he was so hungry.

And Vincent—this was once when Vincent really came through—he told us about this portrait of Van Gogh he'd seen where Van Gogh had painted himself all surrounded by greens and blues “like a churning sea,” Vincent described it. And I wrote this down, too— (*Fumbles for paper.*) —poop—and maybe I won't edit this one out cause it's pretty darn good. (*Reads.*) “Yet he looks out at us from the storm-tossed waters calm and courageous. His eyes like poignant arrows. I will not drown in madness, he says, though I die amidst the waves.” Which made me sad, that life is so hard and frustrating for everybody—and *dispiriting*?—and you just have to somehow take heart.

Anyway, MY GOOD DEED— (*Fumbling, refers to first card.*) —which is really what my video is about, and I'm going to summarize this really quickly, cause I know that's what you want and I'm talking too much.

So, like I said, we're in England and my poor Dad's on this mission to find a document or

something to prove that Oxford—

Oxford picture. Perfunctory, rushed cheering.

—is the true author of Shakespeare’s plays. It’s like this Jehovah’s Witness thing. We go door to door. We’ve even got pamphlets. It’s fun. Only it’s not going very well. There was this one time my poor dad gets so frustrated he just totally comes apart. Like Niobe all tears. Which I won’t go into now—it’s in the video if you want to see.

Okay, so Thomas has this humongous old chest bequeathed to him by his dad—and Thomas, by the way, I forgot to mention, is writing these brilliant medieval poems which he says are by this medieval poet-priest Thomas Rowley and which he says he just found in this chest because, you know, who’s going to believe a sophomore is writing brilliant medieval poetry—fat old Mrs. Doyle? Not. So out of Thomas’s chest leaps practically of its own accord into my hands a copy of Holinshed’s “Chronicles,” which—

Again, for the slow learners.

—for those of you not conversant, is the source of Richard II, Richard III, the Henrys, Lear, *and* Macbeth—and—okay, I probably shouldn’t have done this, but seriously, my poor Dad— . . . (*Confession.*) I signed it with Oxford’s signature. Which is strangely something I have a knack for—forgery. (*Shrugs.*)

And my Dad was like beside himself, he was so happy. For once. Which really made me feel good.

And him and his two friends, Mr. Pompousprat and Mr. Oldfart—who by the way are just so totally *s u r r e a l*, I mean, Mr. Pompousprat wears this big old friggin’ peruke, honest, and Mr. Oldfart looks like he just stepped out of Dickens or somewhere. And Oldfart pulls out this big old lace hanky and starts blubbering when he sees Oxford’s “signature,” and tears even welled up in my Dad’s eyes. And then he like hugs me. Which was— (*A bit of unexpected emotion wells up.*) Well, you know.

But, I’ll tell you, this good deed stuff is a mixed blessing cause the next thing I know they’re all grilling me about where I got the book and Thomas about where he found the

poems, so we had to make up this totally bogus story—Thomas’s was way better than mine—and then of course my dad being my dad wanted more *more MORE*, and so the next thing I know I’m telling them I saw not just the original manuscript of frigging *Hamlet* but a whole new frigging undiscovered play called *The History of the Noble Turk Saladin and The Famous Contention in the Holy Land*. Which, I’ll tell you, how I ever pulled that title out of my posterior I’ll never know.

Oh, and I have to tell you (you’ll see why in a second), meanwhile Vincent has convinced his Pa to send him off to school in Amsterdam to study to be a preacher, where his cousin Kee comes to visit and she gives him this copy of “The Imitation of Christ,” *whereupon* he like—this is so lame—falls in love with her. I mean she’s like fifteen years older than him and a widow and has a kid. And me and Thomas are like all, Vincent!!!! And then he totally screws up in school, and they almost flunk him out, but at the last minute they say, okay, we’ll give you a chance, but then they send him to preach to coalminers in this place that’s like Appalachia. Which of course Vincent being Vincent—and imitating Christ and all—just loves. “There is a phrase that haunts me these days,” he says, “His children shall seek to please the poor.” And then he tells us he’s going to marry Kee. “Two souls have come together.” (*Reaction: “So lame.”*)

Anyway, Thomas comes up with this totally cool idea, which is that we write *The History of the Noble Turk Saladin* together. “Twin poets!,” he says, “We shall be a wonder!” Ha! And it’s so much fun because what happens is as we’re writing, Vincent keeps interrupting (which really got to Thomas after a while, which I’ll tell you about in a second) to tell us about Kee—and which secretly I thought was kind of cool because he kept kind of paralleling what we were writing about. I mean, you know, in our very first scene, Richard Lionheart is getting married and he’s saying (Thomas wrote this, not me, as you can probably tell)—

If I were called to stretch the roll of fate,
Pluck thee from Hell, or bring Heaven down to thee,
Lay the whole world a footstool at thy feet,
One smile would be sufficient meed for me.

Which is exactly what Vincent is saying to Kee, asking her to marry him, but of course Richard's bride says—knowing he's going into battle—

O! like an adder, let me round thee twine,
And shield thy body from the shafts of war.

—while what Kee actually says to Vincent is, “No. Never. *Ever*.” Which is pretty unambiguous. But I have to tell you, Vincent is pretty darn persistent. But that's another story I won't go into.

So anyway, sorry, back to the main story: So this is the part that gets really sad for Thomas, because he's writing all this brilliant stuff, I mean, he's writing these witty articles for magazines, but the magazine publishers keep cheating him because he's just a kid, and he's writing clever songs for the musical halls, but the producers keep cheating him because he's just a kid, and when he does sell something like one of his medieval poems, it's only for a few shillings and it's not for the poetry—I mean listen to this:

(Reads.) Upon the broad sea do the banners gleam;
The prows of the barks cut the glassy stream.
The scarlet painted oars from the black tide
Decored with figures rare do shemring rise,
Upswaling do they show in dreary pride
Like gore-red stars in the eve-dark skies.

But, no, they won't pay him for *that*, but they'll toss him a couple of shillings because it's written on an old scrap of medieval parchment he salvaged from his dad's chest. Which I can't tell you how fu—*four-letter-word*-ing mad that makes me.

Okay, so I have to tell you just one more thing about Vincent before I get to the important part about Thomas and Horace Walpole and me and my Dad. Which is that Vincent—who by the way is still in the coalfields and has given up washing because he wants to be

like the sheep of his flock and has given away most of his clothes, too, not to mention the bread from his very mouth—Vincent won't let poor old Kee alone, you know, because two souls have come together and all and nothing will persuade him otherwise. And he's really pissing everybody off—Kee, his own Pa, her mom and dad. Kee's mom and dad and Vincent's Pa even try to intervene. They take him some new clothes because he's wearing practically rags, and Kee's mom gently says, as she's trying this coat on him, you know, dear, Kee's not the girl for you. And Vincent just freaks, and he throws the coat at her—Kee's mom! Right in her face. I mean, you know, jeez.

So of course Vincent gets banished, not like that's going to stop him. And he does this thing that was so great, I just had to make it part of our play. Which is that he goes to Kee's house to see her, and her mom and dad tell him she's gone, and he says, Nuh-uh, she's here, and I want to see her only as long as I can hold my hand over this candle, which he proceeds to do thinking he'll somehow be able to persuade her that she really loves him, all evidence to the contrary. Which I turn into the scene of Lothaire, the Christian knight, and his "beloved," Fatima, in which Lothaire says—

By Jesu,
Needs must I now turn adamant. I will
Not—nor will all thy ire nor even all
The massèd might of Saladin—move me from
This spot till thou hast let me see her for
That selfsame space which I can keep my hand
Upon this flame. Try me thus.

Thrusts his hand out over imaginary candle flame.

Which—ha!—makes me laugh even now when I say it because that's p r e t t y d a r n g o o d for a doof like me who flunked just about every class I took this year. I guess all those nights my Dad made me sit reading Shakespeare with him weren't for *naught*.

And my Dad loved the scene—and Pompousprat and Oldfart, too, who says, (*Oldfart voice*) Who could doubt but that it was by the Incomparable Bard? And Oldfart kneels down and kisses the manuscript. Which—okay, my head got a *little* big. And my Dad

was happy, bless his heart. And then things got all ruined (a) because my Dad had to tell the whole world and (b) because of what happened between Thomas and Walpole, which I alluded to.

I mean, my scene was p r e t t y d a r n g o o d, but Thomas wrote this speech that was just *phenomenal*. It started—this is Saladin speaking on the morning of the great battle—

Let us for the intended fight be bound.
There is no house, throughout this holy land
That has not lost a kin in these fell fights.
Our blood has surfeited this hungered soil—

—and he goes on about how the Christians have violated the land and all, and it's just eerie how Thomas makes you feel their side of things, their anger. Boy. My Dad pointed out—and I never even thought of this—how perfect the play was because of 9/11 and the Iraq War and everything—“this tortured moment,” Dad said, and how it was another example of Shakespeare pouring out his understanding on the wounded heart of humankind. Which was cool he said that, because of course it wasn't Shakespeare. It was Thomas and me.

So anyway, Thomas is pretty much down to his last ha'penny, and in addition to all those great medieval poems, he and I have written this really good play with his *phenomenally* good speech. And he writes to Walpole, who is a real dick (sorry, but he is), and sends him some poems and the phenomenal speech, and Walpole is all over him. Until he meets Thomas, and because Thomas is just a kid, Walpole is just cruel to him, like calling him a *beggarly apprentice*. What a dickhead.

Anyway, you can stop watching the video here if you want because the rest is pretty depressing. Because poor old Vincent loses Kee of course, and then all these dickhead ministers who are, you know, supposed to be about love and forgiveness and all, gang up on him—even his Pa—and get him thrown out of his pathetic job preaching. I mean, all

he wanted to do was help poor people. Give them some comfort. I mean, yeah, like he's terminally *weird*, but so frigging what? He meant well.

And then, like I said, my Dad has to tell the whole frigging world about the play, and so all these dickhead academicians start ganging up on him, and ruining everything, and making him miserable all over again. And he keeps defending the play because of Oxford of course and even more because of Iraq. So I have to—before he makes total fool of himself—I like screw my courage to the sticking place and I go to him and I say, “Dad, I wrote the play.”

And it was just fucking awful. Cause he just like loses it. He starts like sobbing and crying and drooling. And like I couldn't even watch. Not because he believed me (which he didn't), which was the weird thing. But because he'd just been so disrespected his entire life, like about this Oxford is Shakespeare thing. You know—

Quotes himself, much attenuated: the Oxford picture, the crowd cheering. Which, heck, I didn't know, that everybody made fun of him over it. And it was like now I was disrespecting him, too. And he just couldn't take it anymore, I guess.

So here's the thing I learned: You know I mentioned before that picture Van Gogh painted of himself and how in spite of everything, he took heart? Which is, by the way, a picture you should really look at sometime. Cause it's, um— (*Can't find the word; struggles. Then:*) —cause it's Van Gogh pouring out his understanding on the wounded heart of humankind. Anyway, some people can't take heart, I guess. Like I guess my dad just can't. I mean I think dad is just so totally wounded and *dispirited*. Cause then what happens is after he's all finished catharting, his face is like smeared from crying and he's wiping away snot with the back of his hand and everything, he says—he doesn't even bother to look at me—he says to me in this voice that's all husky and like *spent*, he says, You couldn't write a play. You couldn't even finish high school. You're too stupid.

That really really hurt. I mean, jeez.

And then Thomas says in this voice that's all bright and cheerful he's going to go to sea as a surgeon's mate, whatever the heck that is. But of course he can't go through with it and he knows he can't. Because he's not a surgeon's mate, whatever the heck that is. He's an angel whose every syllable brings Amazement, darn it. And so he just stops and has to admit that to himself, which you can see in his face on the video. And he says to me—

Remembering.

All the Arts of Life they've chang'd into the Arts of Death, Billy—
To bind to labors of day & night the myriads of eternity:
That they might spend their days of wisdom
In sorrowful drudgery to obtain a scanty pittance of bread,
In ignorance to view a small portion & think that All.

And I can't help thinking about what Thomas wrote, your know, like foreshadowing everything:

And of his knights did eke full many die,
Of poignant arrows, tipped with destiny.

A pause. A change.

But that Vincent, I'll tell you, he surprises you. He lifted up his heart. And he tells me that if he could do anything, he'd like to paint pictures of just ordinary people "with something of the eternal, something perhaps like a halo," he says. Because that's the way he sees people. And he starts to sketch Thomas's hand cause he says Thomas will enter the kingdom of heaven because of the ink stains.

And then just out of nowhere Vincent says, cause he's always quoting stuff, "I asked Ezekiel, Why eat ye dung? He answered me: The desire of raising other men into a perception of the Infinite."

Which still makes me think.

It does. A moment. Lights out. End of play.