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Opening Extract from...

Will

Written by Christopher Rush

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Prologue

Francis Collins came today. There's something about March that spurs lawyers on and whips them up afresh, following the long winter glooms, all eyes and ears and anxiousness again. Francis is no exception. I could hear him rubbing his fat palms together as he came up the path. I heard a knocking at the south entry. I was lying in bed but I could see him wiping off the money-smile before Mistress Anne answered the door. See him in my mind's eye, that is, making his fatal entrance. Strange how death's imminence sharpens the senses, enhances the fancy.

'Up today, is he?'

Bark bark, hack hack.

'Jesus, Will, that sounds bad. A churchyard cough. Better get this draft done and dusted.'

Before my own dust settles. I know. (Spoken aside).

Very well, I said – (spoken aloud) – let's draft all cares and business from our age.

He gave me that owl's look, going glassy and goggle-eyed as usual at the merest whiff of blank verse. Not strong on poetry, Francis Collins. Which makes him a good lawyer. And a dull human being. Who comes alive only when he eats and drinks.

'Cares and business, Will? Leave these to me, old friend.'

Gladly, Francis. And what else besides? That I unburdened may crawl towards death – and out of your whispering.

He smiled and shook his head, and I closed my eyes and thought of what's to come: a draft, a will, a death. And exit Will from the world's stage, his last words uninspired, dictated to a quillman, and quite undistinguished from his clerk's mentality. That made me protest a little, I must admit, roused up in me a moment of rebellious frenzy, unseemly to my years.

Is this it then, Francis? *I, William Shakespeare, do appoint*... Is this what it's really come to, in the end?

He put on his pious professional look.

'It's what it always comes to, Will. It's what it must come to.'

Golden lads and girls all must...

'There you are, you said it yourself.'

As chimney-sweepers come to dust.

'Exactly.'

More than exactly, Francis. Do you know what golden lads are – exactly?

'What do you mean?'

It's what we call dandelions in these parts, it's what I used to call them when I was little. Hence the dust idea, seeds, you know?

'I know. We used to call them pee-the-beds. It doesn't change the situation. You were the golden lad of the London theatre for twenty years. And now you're unwell, you're a husband and a father, making a will. And I'm here to assist you. So none of your posturing, master dramatist, and let's get down to it.'

What can you say? What can you do, when you're sick and tired, and your lawyer is pawing the floorboards like a little black bull? You get down to it, of course, just as he directs. Or rather you lie down to it and let him do the scribing – you've had enough of quillwork – and you grunt approval or denial every now and then. He knows your mind, you're surprised by how readily he reads it, telling you what you were going to say in any case. And before the bat has flown his cloistered flight your affairs are settled, your house is in order. As for the frail house of flesh, your tenancy is up, and it will soon be over with you now and forever.

But for you, my masters, my shadows, my audience, my charmed circle, for you it's different. Desire, not business, is your theme. Huddle up then, come close, forget Francis Collins, and tell me what you'd really like to hear. A speech of quality, no doubt, before this humdrum legalese? I can do you anything, gentle friends, any exit piece you care to name – tomorrow and tomorrow, never never never, ripeness is all, the rest is silence. The simplest words worked best, put into the mouths of doomed and dying mortals, words that made even the groundlings stop scratching, stand still and wet their cheeks, like trees bedashed with rain.

What do you say, then? Will you hear the will? – the words required by law, the skeleton text, the narrow facts, the miserly truth, the last anxious dictates of a spidery hand, the spindly paring down of language to one unquestionable unambiguous deed.

Or shall it be a soliloquy spoken from the shroud? If so, then I'm your man, an old actor, after all. Well, not old exactly, at fifty-one, yet that's not much, but frail and ailing in this mild March, gone suddenly cold, some forty plays and thirty years of theatre behind me, and nothing now between me and eternity but the elmwood coffin where my poor bones shall be thrown.

'That's enough of bones and shrouds from you, Master Shakespeare, it's a will I'm about to write out, not a death warrant!'

Francis brought the small table over to the bedside to save my voice and his ears, and started scratching out the opening formalities, ensuring my consent by saying each word out loud and clear, speaking slowly and emphatically as if to an old idiot.

'In the name of God, Amen. I, William Shakespeare, of Stratford upon Avon in the county of Warwick, gent., in perfect health and memory…'

Jesu, I thought, what, will this line stretch out until the crack of doom? I'll be dead before he finishes. But it's no matter. Let him scribble and drawl – that's what he's for, and how he's best contented. As for us, we have other talk on hand, and for that I'd be up and dressed, and out of this nightgown that really is beginning to feel like a shroud. How easy is it, then. Easy to close your eyes, rise like a wraith from your own carcass, don your best boots, your old outmoded apparel, snug enough weeds for Will, reach out across the desk, dip the quill for the last time into that pot of black gold, and with quivering wrist begin to write.

About death: the undiscovered country, the after-dinner sleep, the everlasting cold, the dread of kings, the poor man's friend. A subject on which I wrote with false authority. I became quietus' witness, a theatre expert, an illusionist, an imposture of the end. I killed off scores with quick stabs of the quill, made the parchment weep, made stone mouths bleed roses and Yorick's tongue take root. The words grew like flowers about the vanished lips, and a prince heard echoes of eternity in a silence that has no end. But the rest is never silence, sirs, it is loud with doubt, and eloquent

with the unsaid. And as I sit here now and watch the slow dawns and sunsets set fire to Stratford, I ask myself for one last time, what is death? Somebody once said it has many mansions, and others say it's nothing: rottenness, silence, sleep. I don't know about the mansions. But I do know that death is not nothing. It is rather the sum of all it takes from us. By subtracting from us everything that we had, and reducing us to that much less than zero, to minus whatever we were, death turns out to be the opposite of nothing. It is, quite simply, everything. To know exactly what death is we must therefore know precisely what it is taking away. And so it is with me, in this my last performance. I must curl up once more and go to sleep in the womb. I must be born again. I have to go back to the beginning.

1

'Shall we make a start then, Will?'

They never go away, do they, those conveyancers, those raspers in your ear? Francis Collins poured himself a generous measure of my best burgundy, slugged back a gulletful, topped up the glass, and set it on the little table, next to the quill and ink, the near pristine parchment. I noticed how the bleak March sunlight leaked through the inverted red cone of wine and winked at me from the walls of my room, my death-chamber. Something of the old life stirred in me, something slipping away. But I can't get a grip on the quill. You see to it then, Francis, the penwork. Give me a cup of sack there.

'I know thee not, old man. Behave yourself. You'll have a small glass of what I'm having, and keep your head clear. Now where do you want to begin?'

That was a strange one – want to begin. You don't *want* to begin. The beginning is as out of your control as the end. Someone, something else decides. And where could it have begun but where it did?

In the county of Warwick.

'Yes, you've said that, Will. It's written down. *In the county of Warwick*.'

So come with me if you will. Follow the path of the rain. Jump on the back of an angel as it leaps like feathered Mercury from heaven's floor and descends upon a second heaven, this sceptred isle – and tell me what you see. The emerald heart of England. And winding its way across that fertile green zone, a silvery track, winking at the moon, silent, glittering, as though left there by some night-foundered snail.

Is that poetic enough, Francis? Does that outfox you? You've heard nothing yet. Nor have *you*, my shadows. Descend then, crowd about now, closer still. Descend. Come closer. That lozenge wedge is Warwickshire. The wake of the midnight snail makes a

bright noise now in the morning air.

'The river Avon?'

Divider of fields and forests. Fielden to the south, Arden to the north, the Forest of Arden, the beautiful wild Norman country of Beaudesert. And of all these bounds, even from this line to this, with shadowy forests and with champains riched, with plenteous streams and wide-skirted meads, we make thee lady.

'That's a generous bequest, Will, but not to the purpose.'

That's what I call poetry. And that's what I said once to Anne Hathaway at the end of an afternoon's intimacy: a highly charged act in which I played the player king and made large promises, including loving her forever and knowing no other woman.

'Sounds familiar.'

I'm sure it does. But I'll come to all of that by and by.

By and by is easily said.

Like my name.

'I, William Shakespeare...'

Yes, thank you, Francis. I, William Shakespeare. It has a certain ring to it, you can't deny, no matter which way you say or spell it – and they weren't much fussy in Warwickshire in the good old sixties when I was busy learning to spell the names that God gave you. God had cloth ears. If the recording angel was anything like a Warwickshire scribe, your chances of being correctly identified in the Big Book on Judgement Day were less than one in ninety. This murdered sleep for a time. Supposing there were an orthographic error – and in the scribal confusion I ended up in hell? How have *you* spelt it, Francis? Let me see.

'Now there's really no need – '

Shakspear, Shokspere, Sakspere, Saxpere, Schakosper, Choxper, Shexper, Chacsper, Sadsper, Shagspear –

'Painful on the will.'

Shaxbee, Shaksbye, Sackspree, Sashpierre, Shakespert, Shakeschafte, Shakestaff – I can't make this out.

'God knows who you are, Will, and so does your lawyer. Never afflict yourself. What's in a name?'

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the family, who dreamed of cutting foreign throats, of healths five fathom deep, of breaches, ambuscadoes, Spanish blades. I fetch my life and being from men of royal siege.

'You're wandering, master Shakespeare. This is going to be a long day.'

A long line, though doubtless less dramatic than I invent. There was an Adam of Oldeditch once, my father told me. His son was royally rewarded for war service and he changed his name to Shakespeare to reflect his valour and the dauntless temper of his mind. And so there we were – heroes, self-named.

'Well, it's your descendants that matter now. And your survivors – not your ancestors.'

They were a motley lot, the Shakespeares. I'm talking about the real-life ones. But they were bound to the earth, from which I was determined to escape.

'We all go back to it, Will.'

Thank you for that. Most gladly would I have forgotten it.

'I'm here to remind you. And not only me, remember. Doctor and priest due in today.'

Out on you, owls! Nothing but songs of death. And no priest! What was I telling you about?

'Your ancestors.'

They swarmed out of the Plantagenet times and bred about the heart of the country, oh, two centuries ago. After Bosworth – so it ran from my father's tongue – Welsh Richmond, newly come to power as Henry Seven, and with his claim in his codpiece for all old England knew, making it none too big a claim at that, gave lands in Warwickshire to my great-grandfather.

'A curious lie of the land – and lucrative, if only you'd known where.'

And nobody ever did show me where exactly these lands were supposed to lie. Very likely they did lie, because if the story were true, wouldn't my grandfather have been called Henry, after the jumped-up jack-in-office, by the grateful receiver of the new king's bounty? Whereas my grandfather's name was none other than Richard, after the Tudor upstart's beaten enemy, the much maligned monster of the Yorkists, Crookback Dick. Anyway, they did their bit, the falcons of my folk-line, later to be handed a spear

by the College of Heralds to shake and bristle, and so illustrate their name and valour, warlike then, the birds of my blood. And with phallic fancies too. Shake spear better than Fall staff, don't you think?

'Worthy of the name.'

I can tell you more.

'I can tell you're going to.'

Oh, but they were the strangest of folk, those ancestors. I could see them sometimes on summer nights, drifting in like milk-fog over the fields, anxious or angry in the late sunsets. Sometimes they were a cloud of gnats, human atomies dancing in the air; they were a rising steam, emanating from the early morning earth; a bubbling in the blood, a prickling in the marrow of the bones. I could hear them calling out to me, from out of the black belfries of all those ruined choirs –

'Where late the sweet birds sang.'

You steal my lines Francis. Stick to the numbers that become you! They turned over in their graves like beasts on a spit and made the earth's bedcover rumple and hiss. They fell like rain from a dank drizzling sky, all one long November's day, drowning me in their requiem for themselves. The whole world teemed with them and they rattled the shutters and trickled in at the slats.

'That's weird, Will.'

Weird is the word. I'm telling you how it was. I was fated, haunted. Anyway it was years ago. Now I lie here shivering in this freezing March –

'It's warm enough, Will.'

And what does it matter to me that I'm master of the best house in Stratford? The logs are piled high on the hearth. The blaze in my bones has gone out. Somebody's stone head lies white and heavy in my hands, laved by flames. I can barely feel them at all now, but I know that they died and that once they too must have lived, those Shakespeares of old.

'Old, Will? What's old?'

Old is poor and poor is starving, my mother used to say. My father's father was so old I never even saw him. He went under the Snitterfield snows, having come up there in old Henry the

Eighth's time, and he'd pushed up four springloads of Snitterfield daisies before I arrived on the scene. He didn't starve, though. As tall a man as any in Warwickshire, he was a husbandman, our Richard, a yeoman with an ox-team and a hundred acres round about a peasant roof.

'He must have sweated, though.'

For duty, not for mead. You know how it goes. He tilled the leas, sowed his hops, white and red, bread-corn and drink-corn, wheat and rye, oats and barley, made his beer and cider, pastured his beasts, sheared and slaughtered – and kept his Catholic thoughts to himself.

'You took after him there, Will.'

In a world where even silence could attract an inquisition and send the executioner's hand reaching deep into your bowels to feed a Tyburn fire. That was Richard – and within the book and volume of my young brain that was old, for sure. By the time I was born, Richard Shakespeare had become landscape, that's all, something between the skyline and the mind's eye. He'd been young once, but now he'd become weather.

'Hard to picture that.'

Follow me, then. Stand on the whalebacks of the hills that swim blindly eastwards to Warwick – and you see what Richard Shakespeare saw before he left Budbroke, 1529 it was, to beget John, my father: continents of clouds, that's what, clouds like camels and weasels and whales, rolling endlessly over the earth's green quilt. Twitch it aside for a minute. It covers the hundreds of earlier Shakespeares, the unknowns, all those yeomen who'd made up that bed for generations, season after season, then turned in quietly and gone to sleep. Farming folk. The flocks cropped the grasses over their dead heads that had been wetted only yesterday in the stone fonts at Snitterfield and Rowington. Stone fonts, stone heads – everything petrifies. They lit up like dandelions and were blown out when I told the time, the Shakespeare heads, like moons that fade with morning, like spent stars, cosmic seeds, dust-worlds drifting into oblivion.

'That's poetical.'

It's natural.

'All that lives must die?'