

ERIC'S EARS

In

Shakespeare's Secret

By

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10303 Words

Draft 2

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Prologue

Mr Milton hated history, which was a bit of a problem because Mr Milton was the history teacher at Ponsdon Comprehensive School.

He hadn't always hated history, at least not in the fist-clenching way he did now anyway. As a boy, he had rather enjoyed it. He was good at learning dates and he could remember all the wives of King Henry the eighth, but his real passion was Geography. He loved maps, he could name all the continents, he knew that Vatican City was actually the smallest country in the world, and he knew how mountains were made. But his mum didn't think Geography was of much use.

"It's all been discovered now," she would say to him without looking up from playing a game on her tablet. "There's nothing new in Geography. It's all on your phone anyway. You just use that map thingy. You should study history. There's new history being made every day," she insisted. "There are important people dying today who have never died before."

So Mr Milton studied history, and, after a very long time, he became a history teacher. He was an acceptable history teacher. He could teach it well enough, but it didn't inspire him, and so Mr Milton didn't inspire his pupils. He was an uninspiring teacher in a classroom full of uninspired students, as far as Mr Milton could tell. No one wanted to be there, except for one person, and that person was the reason why Mr Milton had grown to really, really hate history.

That person was Eric Merrick.

Eric Merrick should have been Mr Milton's favourite student; he was always on time, he was polite and well-behaved, and he absolutely loved to learn about

history. But that was the very reason that Mr Milton had grown to hate history so much. Eric's love for the subject made Mr Milton realise how much he didn't like it, and the more he thought about it the more he saw that he was in the wrong job entirely. Eric Merrick wasn't the brightest student, but his overwhelming curiosity, and Mr Milton's inability to satisfy Eric's curiosity, had made Mr Milton question everything about his career, so much so that he dreaded the days when Eric would be in his classroom, eyes wide, hand in the air, his head full of questions that Mr Milton couldn't hope to answer.

Today was one of those days.

Mr Milton climbed the stairs to his classroom, imagining that they were in fact the jagged mountains of Italy, and found himself standing outside of the classroom door. Through the grubby pane of glass, he could see someone was already there, waiting patiently for the lesson to begin.

Chapter 1

"Good morning, Sir," Eric Merrick said with an excitable grin, keen for the lesson to begin.

He watched Mr Milton as he put the pile of books he was carrying down onto the desk at the front of the classroom.

"Morning, Eric," Mr Milton said with a tiny smile.

"What are we learning today?" Eric asked quickly.

Mr Milton sighed. It was a long, deep sigh, like the ones Eric's mum often did when she was picking up his dirty clothes from his bedroom floor. The sigh ended, but Mr Milton didn't answer Eric's question, he just carried on sorting through books and papers on his desk.

"Sir?" Eric said eventually.

There was another sigh. This one started softly, but grew louder and changed tone as Mr Milton exhaled, like a train passing Eric's bedroom late at night, doing its best not to wake anyone.

"You'll see," Mr Milton said eventually. His voice was flat and tired, but those words sent a jolt of excitement through Eric's thin body.

You'll see.

That was enough to get Eric's imagination working in overdrive, and he spent the next few minutes trying to decide what they might be learning about. You see, Eric Merrick loved History, in fact it was his most favourite lesson. Really! He loved it so much that he wanted to know everything about it. Every tiny detail. The sort of things that the history books usually didn't tell you.

What did the Great Fire of London smell like?

Can Popes swim?

Who would win in a fight: President John F Kennedy or Queen Victoria?

That sort of thing. He'd ask so many questions that his teacher, Mr Milton, would turn an odd shade of purple and the veins on his head would throb.

As Eric wondered about today's lesson, the rest of the class drifted in and took their seats. The noise of laughter and chatter grew until Mr Milton stood up and fixed the class with an icy stare.

The chatter ceased, and Mr Milton's stern face broke into a smile.

"Good morning, class," Mr Milton began, and Eric leaned forward over his desk in anticipation.

"Today, we are going to learn about William Shakespeare," Mr Milton said as his wide eyes scanned the room. "Has anyone heard of William Shakespeare?"

"I have," said Poppy McLurg.

"Really?" Mr Milton replied, sounding surprised. "Who is he?"

"He's my brother's piano teacher, I think," Poppy McLurg said doubtfully, screwing up her face as she thought about it.

"No, he's not your brother's piano teacher," Mr Milton said patiently. "William Shakespeare was quite a famous writer, and I'm surprised none of you have heard of him before."

"Simon Shovepool!" Poppy McLurg exclaimed with a grin.

Mr Milton blinked quickly as he stared at her. "Excuse me?"

"Simon Shovepool. He's my brother's piano teacher," Poppy McLurg said with satisfaction. "He's doing Grade Four now."

Mr Milton frowned. "Simon Shovepool sounds nothing like William Shakespeare."

"I know!" Poppy McLurg said with a surprised smile.

Mr Milton shook his head, and his eyebrows raised up as if they'd had enough of living on his face and were about to leave. Thankfully, Mr Milton's eyebrows changed their mind and returned to their rightful place, just above his eyes. "As I was saying, William Shakespeare was a very famous writer."

"What did he write about?" Eric asked.

"We'll get to that, Eric," Mr Milton sighed. "You can put your hand down."

Eric didn't put his hand down. His arm shot up higher, lifting him off his chair. Eric couldn't help himself. He got so excited when his head filled up with questions.

"Mr Milton, Mr Milton!" Eric shouted. "'How many teeth did he have?" Having recently lost one of his own teeth, this was a question that Eric thought about a lot.

Mr Milton ignored Eric's question.

"Sir?" Eric persisted. "Does he do funny stories?"

This time Mr Milton responded. "Yes, some of them are very funny," he said with a smile.

"Do they have robots in them?"

"No."

"Oh," Eric said, feeling disappointed. But then more questions popped into his brain. "Can he dance? Where does he get his ideas from?"

Mr Milton frowned and turned his back on Eric. He clicked at his computer and a picture of a man with really weird hair filled the whiteboard at the front of the class. But it wasn't the man's hair that puzzled Eric, it was something else. Something large and smooth and shiny. The man in the picture had the biggest forehead Eric Merrick had ever seen.

"This is William Shakespeare," Mr Milton said with a wave of his arm.

"That's a lot of skin," Eric noted. "Why is his head so big?"

"It's not big. He's just a bit bald." Mr Milton replied, stroking his own wispy hair into place.

"A bit? Wow!" Eric gasped. "How did that happen?"

Mr Milton sat in his chair, looking tired. "I really have no idea, Eric. Now please, put your hand down."

Eric lowered his hand, feeling deflated, but he could hear the change in tone in Mr Milton's voice, and Eric knew it was time to stop asking questions. His overenthusiastic curiosity frequently irritated his teachers, and his constant questioning had helped to propel him into detention on more than one occasion.

"You're going to learn all about William Shakespeare," Mr Milton explained, "and I want you to find out as much as you can about him, his work, his life, his family. What were his parents called? Did he have any children?"

As Mr Milton spoke to the class, Eric looked down at his desk and saw his pencil case resting there. It was a dinosaur shaped pencil case called Ernest that had been given to him by his late grandfather. (Eric wasn't sure why people said it like that. His grandfather wasn't late, he was dead, and was unlikely to be late for anything ever again.)

Eric stared at Ernest, putting questions about dead people out of his head for now. Ernest was a bit grubby, his bright colours a little faded, but he was still Eric's favourite possession. In fact, he was more than just a pencil case; Ernest was Eric's best friend. He stroked Ernest's colourful fur, enjoying how smooth he could make it,

then he ruffled it up and started again, thinking about all the adventures he and Ernest had had together.

“Now, we’re going to be studying one of William Shakespeare’s plays,” Mr Milton told the class. “It’s called *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.”

He picked up a pile of books and passed them through class, dropping one on Eric’s desk with a friendly smile.

Eric put Ernest to one side and picked up the little book and flicked through the pages, disappointed that there weren’t any pictures to help him.

Around him, the rest of the class opened their books and began to read, but Eric was still thinking, and he realised he hadn’t been listening to Mr Milton at all. His head was still full of questions about this strange man with the giant forehead. He had to know the answer to his questions. He looked about the class; no one was paying him any attention; they were reading along as Mr Milton guided them through the text.

“Merrick?” Mr Milton bellowed, making Eric jump. He knew he was in trouble because Mr Milton had called him by his last name.

“Yes, Sir?” he replied nervously.

“Are you reading this?” the teacher asked, waving the book in the air.

Eric glanced at the book on his desk. “Yes, Sir,” he lied.

“Very good,” Mr Milton replied, sounding far from convinced. “The top of page six begins with . . .”

Eric held the book in his hands and retreated behind the pages. He tried to read along, but his mind was far too distracted to listen to Mr Milton.

"It's very important that you all pay attention," Mr Milton said as he walked up and down the classroom, "because you're all going to perform *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for your parents. It's a combined project with me and your English and Drama teachers."

Some of the children gasped with excitement, some of them sighed with indifference, but Eric let out a little nervous giggle.

"Something funny, Eric?" Mr Milton asked.

Eric gulped. "No, Sir, sorry, Sir."

There was nothing to laugh at, and Eric wasn't sure why he'd let out a tiny giggle. He wasn't happy at all. He didn't like being on stage, and he didn't like to perform in front of the other children and their parents.

"Sir? Do we have to be in the play?" Eric asked, his voice trembling.

"It'll be fun," Mr Milton replied, trying to reassure him.

"It won't be fun. I don't want to do it."

Mr Milton frowned. "You won't know if you like it until you try it."

Eric sighed, feeling trapped. "What do I have to do?"

Mr Milton beamed. "Don't worry, Eric, I've chosen the perfect part for you."

Chapter 2

Eric Merrick stood at the side of the stage, peering out past the edge of the heavy red curtain to the dark hall beyond. He shielded his eyes from the glare of the spotlights to see if he could spot his mum in the packed audience, but he could only just make out the faces in the front row, and none of them he recognised. He knew she was out there; she'd swapped her shift at the supermarket just so she could be here to see Eric.

On the stage, Penny McLurg was speaking to the audience. It was more like shouting, actually. She was doing her best to project her voice so that everyone could hear, just as their teacher, Mr Milton, had taught them, but Penny had taken this advice to the next level. Her screechy voice brought out wincing of pain from those closest to her as she carefully delivered the opening lines of the play. Penny was word perfect. She never had a problem remembering what to say.

Unlike Eric.

It had seemed so easy during rehearsals, but now, with the lights focused on the stage, and the expectant hush of the audience, Eric couldn't remember a thing!

He turned from the stage to find Mr Milton.

"Sir," he whispered. "Remind me again, what are we doing?"

Mr Milton didn't reply. Instead, he put his finger to his lips to silence Eric and handed him a copy of the script.

Eric read the front cover: "*A Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare."

Mr Milton glared at Eric, wide eyed, miming at him to shush.

"Sorry," Eric whispered as quietly as he could. He looked at the script again, hoping it might help. They had been studying *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for the

last few weeks, but as Eric stared at the cover, he couldn't bring a single detail about the play into his mind.

He put the script down and began to sweat. He felt a queasy trembling in his stomach as he thought about going on stage in front of his mum and not being able to remember why he was there. The muscles in his legs twitched, as if they wanted to run away from here as fast as possible.

Eric took a deep breath, resisting the urge to flee. Instead, he gave his left ear a gentle flick, and he felt a familiar tingle growing in his ear lobe.

Not so long ago, Eric had eaten a sponge cake covered in gravy and sweetcorn as a dare at school dinners. As he swallowed the odd mixture, Eric had undergone a remarkable transformation: his ears had grown to twice their normal size, and the skin had turned a deep shade of red. It was so odd that Eric had been in the local newspaper, and the school had banned sweetcorn from their lunchtime meals.

After a few days, Eric's ears returned to their normal size and hue, but that was just the start of it. Since then he could travel in time and space just by using his ears! All he had to do was think about where he wanted to go and give his left ear a friendly flick. In a flash, he'd disappear from wherever he was and find himself somewhere completely different: the Jurassic period, the Wild West, Victorian London. Anywhere! Then, when he'd found the answers to all of his questions, he'd rub his right ear and he'd find himself back where he had started.

Right now, as his left ear tingled, he thought about William Shakespeare and his play. If he could find Shakespeare, Eric would know what to do. The tingling in his ear grew and grew, spreading to his neck, his chest, his arms . . .

But he'd forgotten about Ernest!

Ernest was Eric's faithful companion on his time-travelling adventures, and he couldn't leave without him! Eric rushed to find his bag of clothes and rummaged inside until his hand touched a familiar furry pencil case.

"Ernest," Eric sighed with relief as he gazed on his old friend.

At the same moment, his legs began to tingle.

"Eric?" Mr Milton hissed as he searched in the darkness at the edge of the stage.
"You're due on any second now!"

There was no time to lose! Eric held Ernest tightly, feeling the tingle growing stronger and spreading throughout his body. The gloomy stage began to fade away, and Eric and Ernest whizzed down a tunnel made of colour as they travelled into the past.



Chapter 3

"Where are we going this time?" Ernest asked.

Eric smiled at the sound of his friend's deep, slow voice. He was no longer a tiny, fluffy pencil case; Ernest had grown to be almost twice as tall as Eric, a thin, furry, red dinosaur with a pair of large, round glasses balanced on his flat face. Yellow dinosaur spines lined his back, and a huge zip was visible along his right side. He grinned at Eric, and his massive mouth revealed a set of jagged, oddly spaced teeth.

"We're going into the past," Eric said proudly.

"I know that," Ernest said as the swirling colours around them began to slow. "We always go into the past."

"True," Eric agreed. "I'm not sure of the exact date. We're going to meet a man."

"A man?"

"William Shakespeare," Eric said.

"Ah," Ernest replied, nodding. "Born 1564, died 1616. He died on his birthday."

"Did he eat too much cake?" Eric wondered.

"I don't know," Ernest replied. Ernest was very good with facts.

The swirling colours stopped swirling and became ordinary non-swirly colours, and Eric could start to see shapes forming around them. He looked down at his feet, just as they landed onto something wet and squidgy.

"Mud?" Eric said, screwing up his nose.

"And lots of it," Ernest replied as he inspected the bottom of his foot. "This will never come out of my fur."

Eric looked around him and saw a line of market stalls selling all sorts of strange things. The closest one was full of coloured cloth, the next was selling piles of

chopped wood. Opposite them was a row of stalls selling meat and vegetables. Eric recognised sacks of potatoes and carrots, but some of the vegetables were completely alien to him. The chopped meat, the strange fruit, and the unusual vegetables, it all of it gave of a sickly smell that made him want to stuff his nose with some of the soggy mud that covered his shoes.

“Where are we?” Eric wondered as he held his nose, making him sound odd.

“Judging by the skyline, we’re in London,” Ernest noted, pointing to a distant stone building that looked a bit like a castle.

Eric stared at it, feeling a tingle of recognition. “The Tower of London! We did a school project on it last year.”

“Year before last,” Ernest said.

“Was it?”

“Yes.”

“Wow, okay,” Eric replied. “So, we’re in London, but when?”

Ernest sniffed the air as he undid the long zip that ran down his side. He put his hand inside and rummaged around until he pulled out a large, heavy looking book:

London Smells: A Year-By-Year Guide.

Ernest opened the book and flicked through the pages. “Judging by the stink of the drains, the smoke and manure, I’d guess at August 1601. A Tuesday.”

“You’re sure?” Eric asked, impressed by his friend’s skill.

"Pretty sure," Ernest replied as he slammed the book shut and returned it to his giant pocket, "but it could be a Wednesday."

Eric and Ernest walked past the market stalls, ignoring the strange looks they were getting from the other people there.

"Well, we're in the right place, at the right time," Eric said.

Ernest nodded. "But where will we find William Shakespeare? It's a big city."

Eric spotted a poster on a wall and smiled. "I think we'll find him at the Globe Theatre," he said, reading from the poster.

Ernest turned to see it and patted Eric on the shoulder. "Well done, Eric!"

"Which direction is it?" Eric asked as he looked about him.

Ernest pulled out a large fold-out map of London and took a moment to get his bearings.

"That way," he said at last, pointing down a sloping alleyway between the tightly packed buildings.

As they walked through the streets of London, Eric marvelled at the smells and sounds. There wasn't a car in sight, just horses, dogs and some very large, very hairy rats.

"Do you know anything about the Globe Theatre?" Eric asked Ernest.

"Here," Ernest said, handing over a guidebook. "You do some research while I do the navigating."



"Thanks," Eric replied, glad to see that it was a guidebook with lots of illustrations. Some people thought Eric wasn't so bright because he struggled with words, but Eric tried not to listen to those people.

"It's a new theatre," Eric noted. "It's only a couple of years ooooooIIlddd!"

The end of his sentence stretched out to become a teeth-wrenching cry as Eric's foot slipped in the wet mud and straw, and he found himself on his back, sliding down the watery gutter at the edge of the narrow alleyway.

"Eric!" Ernest shouted as he tried to catch his friend. Eric wriggled, hoping to stop himself, but that just seemed to propel him down the alleyway even faster.

Ahead, the pathway came to an abrupt end. The smelly water disappeared over the edge and dropped into the brown depths of the river Thames. Eric gasped! He couldn't stop himself; he was going to fall into the river!

Then, at the last second, something grabbed his collar, and he came to a sudden stop, his legs hanging over the edge of the path.

Eric glanced up to see a hand holding him in place. He looked up the arm to the face of the person who had saved him, and Eric couldn't help but laugh at the stranger's giant, shiny forehead.

Chapter 4

"William Shakespeare!" Eric shouted.

The man pulled Eric to his feet and stood back to see him. "Young sir! You are fortunate that I did grasp your tiny hand at the critical moment! Otherwise, the dark fathoms of the Thames would have consumed you into its unworthy body."

Eric stared at him, baffled. The man looked a lot like the picture on Mr Milton's whiteboard, complete with the weirdly big forehead.

Breathing heavily, Ernest caught up with his friend. "Are you alright?" he asked.

"I'm fine," Eric replied, "thanks to this man."

Ernest turned to look at the stranger, and his fluffy eyebrows shot upwards in surprise.

"Who art thee, young sir?" the stranger asked Ernest.

"Hello, I'm Ernest," said Ernest. "and this is Eric."

The man stared at Ernest's soft purple fur. "Art thou human?"

Ernest smiled proudly. "Pencilsaurus Rex. Part dinosaur, part pencil case."

"Ah," said the man, looking confused. "I have never heard of a dinosaur, or a pencil case. How very unusual."

"He's unique," Eric said. He'd only recently learned what *unique* meant, so he was glad to be able to use it so soon.

The man smiled politely, bowed, and said: "You appear unharmed by your adventure, so I will bid you a good day."

Thinking quickly, Eric bowed like he'd learned to do in the school play. "Good day to you too, Sir. My name is Eric. . . of Merrick. I bid you greetings from the future. Are you William Shakespeare?"

The man sighed. "Tis I, yes. I doth suppose you are a fan of my work?"

Eric nodded, uncertain what he meant. He spoke very strangely.

"You are the third today. I suppose you seek out my signature?"

Eric stared at him, a dopey look on his face.

"My autograph. My self-written name," William Shakespeare explained. "Or perhaps a quick sketch of our faces together? They're very popular with the younger folk. A self-sketch, they call them. I prefer the term 'selfie', but I do not think it will catch on."

Eric shook his head. "No, I just wanted to ask you a few questions."

"Oh," Shakespeare said, looking disappointed "That is acceptable. Question on, young sir."

"How many teeth do you have?" Eric asked.

Shakespeare looked a bit annoyed. Then he began to work his tongue round his mouth, counting. "Twenty-five," he declared. "This one," he pointed to a rather long looking tooth at the side of his mouth, "is sharper than a serpent's tooth."

"They're a bit yellow," Eric noticed.

"These teeth are as white as whale bone! I clean them twice a week," Shakespeare said proudly. "Doth thou have more questions for me?"

"Yes!" Eric exclaimed. "Do you write funny stories?"

"My tales abound with mirth, young man," Shakespeare announced grandly. "My words embrace all of humanity; life, death, delight and sorrow."

"Do they have robots in them?"

William Shakespeare tilted his head to one side. "Robots? Ro. . . bots? What are robots?"

"Nothing," Ernest smiled. "Nothing you need worry about."

"So, no robots then?" Eric asked his friend.

"I'm afraid not, Eric," Ernest replied.

Shakespeare frowned at Eric and Ernest. "Is that all of your questions?"

"No! I've more!" Eric said. "Where do you get your ideas from?"

Shakespeare reddened and turned to leave. "Away, boy. I have much work to do."

Eric walked to catch up with him. "But I have to know."

"Desist! Leave me!" Shakespeare shouted as he broke into a sprint.

Amazed, Eric turned to Ernest and said, "He's running away!"

"I can see that," Ernest replied as he watched William Shakespeare disappear around a corner. "Shall we chase him?"

"Obviously!" Eric replied, and the pair pursued the playwright.



Chapter 5

"We've lost him," Eric said, breathing hard.

"I bet we'll find him at the Globe," Ernest replied as he got out his map once more. He swiftly checked it and pointed to a distant building. "There!" he shouted with a grin.

Moving quickly, Eric and Ernest navigated through the narrow streets. Eric tried to avoid the dirty-looking puddles and slippery straw as he marched behind the giant purple shape of his best friend. He always felt safe with Ernest close by.

Ahead, was an impressively large circular building.

"Is that the Globe?" Eric asked as they slowed.

"Indeed it is," Ernest replied.

"Why is it called the Globe," Eric wondered. "It's a cylinder, not a sphere."

"Check the guidebook," Ernest suggested, handing it to him.

Eric read for a moment, finding the answer. "Ah, it's a sort of nickname. It's to do with something in Latin." He looked up from the book. "What's Latin? Is that another language?"

Ernest nodded. "Latin is an ancient language that started in Rome. People often use it to make things sound a bit posh or clever."

Eric kept reading. "Apparently the Latin motto says, 'all the world is a playground.'"

"Ah, and the world is a globe?" Ernest wondered, raising his bushy eyebrows.

"I think so, yeah," Eric replied.

"Very interesting, but it doesn't help us find Shakespeare."

"You're right," Eric said, handing the guidebook back to his friend.

Ernest tucked the map and guidebook inside his giant pocket and pulled the zip up.

"Let's go find him," Eric said. He stepped over a water-filled gully that ran around the Globe like a tiny moat and walked towards the entrance.

They stood in front of a giant wooden door, and Eric felt the flutter of nerves in his stomach. Eric often felt like this when he had to do something new or scary. At least he had Ernest by his side, smiling down at him.

"It's just a door," Ernest said, aware of Eric's unease.

Eric straightened. "You're right."

"Always am," Ernest replied.

Eric made a fist and knocked on the door. After a moment, he heard voices on the other side, and the mighty door was pulled open. A troupe of men came marching out, talking between themselves and not giving Eric and Ernest a second glance.

". . . ran out of ideas," one of the men said as he shuffled by.

"We can't put on half a play," another replied with a sigh.

"That's the end of Shakespeare then," a third said as the group walked away.

Eric and Ernest watched them go, then they turned back to the open door.

"Shall we?" Eric asked.

"Well, we've come this far," Ernest replied.

Together, they stepped through the doorway and into the Globe. It was a broad circular space surrounded by enclosed seating areas, and Eric was surprised to see that the roof didn't cover the middle part.

"Won't people get wet when it rains?" Eric said, staring up at the bright sky.

"They did," Ernest replied. "This area was for people to stand. The tickets were cheaper than in the seated areas."

Eric shook his head. "No seat, no roof?"

"No."

Eric pictured the school hall with its warm, dry seats, and he wondered what Shakespeare would make of it. Eric's grandad used to say things were better in the past, but as Eric felt a drop of rain hit his forehead, he couldn't help but disagree.

Together, Eric and Ernest climbed the steps up to the stage. In the shadows at the side, half hidden behind painted scenery, was a short man with a large shiny head sitting at a desk.

"There he is," Eric whispered. "There's William Shakespeare."

The man glanced up, obviously having heard Eric's not-very-whispery whisper, and his eyes widened in surprise. "You two again?"

"Hello, Mr William," Eric said nervously.

"Tis a foul day that you have chosen to visit," Shakespeare grumbled. "Perhaps you are both dark omens, here to stop my toil."

Eric frowned. "Your toil?"

"My work!" Shakespeare shouted as he threw down a pile of paper onto the stage floor. "My writing! You have vexed my progress! You have robbed me of my imagination!"

"We have?" Ernest asked, sounding hurt.

Shakespeare glared at Ernest, then his face softened. "I apologise. My dilemma predates our encounter, so I cannot blame my misfortune on you two."

"Your misfortune?" Eric asked.

"Not only my misfortune, young man, but all of London's." William Shakespeare held his head theatrically. "Tis a dark day for all, a dark day indeed."

Ernest put his soft, fluffy arm on Shakespeare's shoulder. "What's wrong?"

"The quill sits, untouched," Shakespeare sobbed. "The ink dries in its pot. The page remains spotless. The play has no end."

Eric moved closer. "I don't understand."

Shakespeare tapped the side of his big head. "The ideas are all gone. I am a spent force. The words no longer breed in my mind. I am a husk of my former self. This beautiful head is empty."

Ernest gasped.

Eric also gasped, but he still wasn't sure why.

"I can no longer write!" Shakespeare explained, sobbing.

Chapter 6

"But you're William Shakespeare," Ernest said. "You have to write! It's what you do."

Shakespeare shook his head, causing his wispy hair to dance hypnotically. "Not anymore! My writing days are at an end. There are no more ideas left for me to explore. The curtain hath fallen on my humble tales."

As Shakespeare sobbed, Ernest pulled out another book from his pocket: A History of William Shakespeare and his work. His giant paws opened the book and, as Ernest began to read, a worried expression formed on his fuzzy face.

"What's wrong?" Eric asked in a tiny whisper.

"Shakespeare's writing career shouldn't end here. He's still got to write some of his most famous works: Hamlet, The Tempest, Much Ado About Nothing, and . . ."

Ernest sighed.

"And what?" Eric asked impatiently.

"A Midsummer Night's Dream."

Eric blinked quickly. "But that's our school play."

"Exactly," said Ernest.

Suddenly, a brilliant idea bounced into Eric's head. "I'll just give him my copy," he said, searching his pockets. But Eric's copy of the play was missing. "I must have left it at school," he said, sadly.

Ernest closed the book and put it away. "We have to get to the bottom of Shakespeare's problem, otherwise he might never write again."

Eric's shoulders slumped. "That sounds like more work."

"True, but sometimes problems can't be fixed easily."

Eric sighed. "You're right again."

"I know," Ernest agreed.

Eric took a deep breath and approached the miserable looking playwright. He was sat at his small desk in the dark, surrounded by books and piles of paper, the only light coming from a feeble candle. Shakespeare held a feather pen in his hand, but his big round head was resting on a sheet of paper on the desk.

"Sir. . ." Eric said cautiously. "Mr William. Why can't you write anymore?"

Shakespeare lifted his head up and wiped his eyes. "Tis a private matter, young man."

"Maybe we can help," Eric offered.

Shakespeare laughed wearily. "I doubt that very much."

"Please, tell me," Eric replied.

"You cannot help! Now, leave me alone," Shakespeare said.

Ernest stepped closer. "We'd really like to help you."

"We have to!" Eric added.

"Leave me!" Shakespeare insisted. "I am a broken man, let me fade away here in the shadows. Be gone and forget the name William Shakespeare for all time."

Eric folded his arms. "We're not going anywhere."

This surprised Shakespeare. He blinked quickly, blustering as he tried to find a reply. "You're not leaving?"

"Nope," Eric said firmly. "Not until you tell us what's wrong."

"Really?" Shakespeare asked.

Ernest also folded his arms. "Really, really."

"You won't leave me in peace?" Shakespeare asked pathetically.

"Sorry, we can't," Eric explained. "Not until I know the answer."

Shakespeare threw down his feather, splashing ink over the paper in front of him.

"Then will you leave me to my toil?"

Eric nodded.

"Very well," Shakespeare said, lowering his voice. "You see this meal before me?"

He pointed to a plate next to his papers. On it was a collection of sad-looking salad leaves next to some slices of cooked meat and a chunk of cheese.

"This is the source of my desperation," Shakespeare explained with a sigh.

Eric stared at the food. It looked normal enough. "I don't understand."

"How could you? No one could," Shakespeare said wearily.

"Don't you like your food?" Ernest asked.

Shakespeare shrugged. "Tis fine nourishment, it sustains me, but it no longer holds my inspiration." He jabbed at the cheese, making it wobble back and forth. "You see, this was the font of my ideas, young creature. This was my muse, the reason for my writing."

"I'm not keen on lettuce either," Eric said.

Shakespeare glared at him angrily. "I speak the truth and yet you still do not comprehend." He slumped in his chair, looking dejected. "No one understands."

"Please, go on," Ernest said with an encouraging smile.

Shakespeare took a deep breath. "I love food," he said. "Tis a wonderous thing. I have all my best ideas when I'm eating."

"Then eat up!" Eric said, pushing the plate towards Shakespeare.

Shakespeare pushed it back. "Yet still you do not understand! Each new taste planted the seed of an idea in my brain. Each combination brought forth a new invention, an untold story, fully formed inside my giant mind." He stroked his shinny

head sadly. "But now all the flavours are spent. There is nothing new to taste in all of creation, and my ideas are stale and old."

"Ah," Ernest said slowly, in that way he sometimes did. He moved closer to Eric and threw an arm around him. "I think I understand," he said quietly to his friend.

"You do?" Eric asked.

"I do," Ernest replied.

"Do tell," Eric said.

"William Shakespeare finds inspiration in his food," Ernest explained. "The combination of tastes helps him to come up with new ideas."

"Sounds OK," Eric noted.

"But now Shakespeare has tasted everything. He's ran out of new combinations to try, so he has also run out of inspiration. That's why he can't write."

"Oh, I see," Eric replied as he tried to take it all in. "So, he's tried everything?"

"I think so, yes," Ernest replied.

"And he's ran out of new food to try?"

Ernest nodded.

"Then I know how to fix this!" Eric declared, feeling excited.

"How?" Ernest asked.

"We have to find something new for William Shakespeare to eat!"

Chapter 7

"Where are we going?" William Shakespeare asked, looking worried as Eric and Ernest dragged him out of the Globe Theatre.

"We're going shopping!" Eric said excitedly.

"Shopping?" Shakespeare replied. "What is this madness?"

"I've never enjoyed shopping either," Ernest noted to himself. "Too many people, bright lights, too much noise."

"I know not what shopping means!" Shakespeare exclaimed.

Ernest stopped. "Ah, yes, it's not a common word in 1601. We are going to buy things."

"Here!" Eric exclaimed, spotting a brightly coloured fruit on a market stall ahead. He picked it up and held it over his head, feeling triumphant.

"A banana?" Shakespeare said flatly.

"Yes!" Eric replied, starting to feel a bit silly. "Have you tried it?"

"Of course I've tried it," Shakespeare replied, "and I don't like it."

"Me neither," Eric admitted, returning the fruit to the pile where he had taken it from. He began to scour the rows of stalls, trying to find something that Shakespeare might not have tried.

"Here!" Ernest said, grabbing a spiky fruit that Eric struggled to recognise.

"Pineapple is hardly something new," Shakespeare said dismissively. "Some say that fresh fruit is bad for you, but that has not stopped me. I have eaten everything on sale here. Nothing is new or unknown to me."

"Oh," Ernest replied, still holding the pineapple.

A grumpy looking woman standing behind the stall screwed up her face and glared at Ernest. "Are you buying that or not?" she asked angrily.

"Not," Ernest replied, handing it back to the muttering stall holder.

Eric tried not to lose heart and searched the stalls, hunting for anything that might be new or unusual. Gleefully, he held up a potato. He remembered learning about it in History. The potato was only brought to Britain in 1586. (Eric was good at remembering dates.)

Shakespeare snorted. "Potatoes are no longer the fashion, young man. They are a passing trend that will be forgotten about by next summer."

"Really?" Eric replied.

"I guarantee it," Shakespeare said confidently.

Eric put the potato down and whispered in Ernest's ear. "I thought he was supposed to be clever."

Ernest shrugged.

"What might he not have tried?" Eric wondered. "He's tried a potato. . . What about crisps? Do they have crisps yet?"

"I don't think so," Ernest replied. "Do you have any crisps with you?"

"No," Eric replied sadly. "You?"

Ernest shook his big fuzzy head.

"Do you have any food on you?"

Ernest checked inside his giant pocket and, after a moment, he pulled out his empty hand. "No."

"Me neither," Eric replied with a sigh.

"Gentlemen, I fear my fleeting time with you must end here, at this fair stall," Shakespeare said, bowing. "There is much I must consider. Perhaps now that my hours are not filled with the endless toil of being an excellent writer, I might explore my love of drainpipes."

"Drainpipes?" Eric and Ernest said at the same time.

Shakespeare caressed a pot drainpipe on a nearby building. "They be objects of simple beauty, don't you think? I shall dedicate the rest of my life to their study."

"No, no," Eric replied, dragging him away. "That's no good. You have to write!"

"No, young Eric, I am free of my great burden." Shakespeare raised his voice. "Let all London know that William Enid Shakespeare shall ne'r write again."

Eric glanced at Ernest. "Enid?"

"Every day is a school day," Ernest replied, looking surprised.

"Mr Shakespeare," a man said, striding towards the playwright from the gathering crowd. He was dressed in a fancy-looking dark jacket with shining gold buttons up its front. He held out his hand and presented Shakespeare with a letter. "I have been looking for you everywhere."

Shakespeare stared at the man. "Who, Sir, are you?"

"Cedrik Medrik McEdwick, Equerry to Her Majesty," the man said in a nasally voice. He pushed his hand forwards, waiting until William Shakespeare took the letter from him. Trembling, William Shakespeare opened the letter and began to read.

Eric peered past Shakespeare to see the opened letter. On the page was a simple message written in flowing, complicated handwriting: Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth the First requests the pleasure of William Shakespeare's new play, this evening.

"The Queen," Shakespeare muttered.

McEdwick nodded, his eyes closed. "The Queen demands an audience."

Shakespeare folded up the letter and smiled as he tried to compose himself. "I would be happy to entertain the Queen, perhaps in a week or two when—"

"Tonight," Cedrick Medrick McEdwick replied. "Her Majesty wishes to see your new play tonight."

"But . . . but it's not finished," Shakespeare blustered.

"Then her Majesty will be disappointed . . . and displeased. You can tell her yourself when she visits."

"No, it's impossible. Tell her she can't—"

"No one tells the Queen she can't!" McEdwick shouted, then he turned on his heel and marched away.

Chapter 8

"Tis a futile exercise! I cannot write." William Shakespeare threw down his quill pen onto the table and began to pace the tiny room. From a stool in the corner of the Bard's office, Eric watched the great writer as he marched up to the window, then turned to march towards the other side of the little room – three paces in all – then back towards the window once more. As he followed the hypnotic movements, Eric thought about the school play, and tried to remember his lines. But it was no good, they were still hiding somewhere inside his brain, refusing to come out.

Ernest, who was hunched over because of the room's low ceiling, stepped into Shakespeare's path, forcing him to stop. "You just need to relax, then you'll be able to write."

"Bah!" Shakespeare exclaimed. "All this stress is the reason I'm going bald!"

Eric stared at him. "I hadn't noticed."

"Look at me!" Shakespeare pointed to his head. "Look at my beautiful hair! The more I worry about my writing, the more my hair falls out. Have you seen the size of my forehead? It's ridiculous!"

"It's just a normal-ish forehead," Eric said, feeling uncomfortable.

"Tis a curse, young sir. I am doomed to be the greatest writer this isle has ever produced, but with a head like a pig's bladder in a wig. Years from now young students of my work will mock my shining globe."

Eric let out a little laugh, but then Shakespeare began to sob, and Eric felt guilty for mocking him. "It'll be okay," Eric promised him.

"I'm sorry," Shakespeare said at last, composing himself. "I am being a foolish old fool. Queen Elizabeth is coming, and a play I must produce!"

Shakespeare returned to his desk and picked up his quill pen. He stared at the blank page as he curled his long hair around his finger. Eric watched him, amazed to see that William Shakespeare stuck his tongue out of the side of his mouth when he was thinking, just like Eric did.

He whispered to Ernest: "Queen Elizabeth? Isn't that our queen?"

"Ours is Queen Elizabeth the Second," Ernest explained in a hushed voice. "Queen Elizabeth the First is on the throne in William Shakespeare's time."

"Ah, I see," Eric said, still playing with the idea in his head.

Ernest gestured to Shakespeare's blank page. "Can you remember how the play ends?"

"Sort of," Eric said, thinking hard. "There's someone who's in love with someone else, and the fairies have made him fall in love with a different person, then there's a bunch of actors rehearsing a play for the wedding at the end. I play a character called Bottom who gets turned into a donkey." Eric sighed. "I'll be honest, I don't really understand it all."

Ernest sighed. "I don't think that's going to help him write this, do you?"

"No. What about you? Anything in that giant pocket of yours?"

"I've already checked," Ernest said sadly.

"Then it's up to Shakespeare to write his play," Eric replied.

"As it ever was!" Shakespeare shouted, erupting from his chair in frustration. "I cannot write, not without my inspiration! I need sustenance! Something new! Something I have never tried before. Without it, we are lost!"

"You're hungry?" Eric asked him.

"Indeed I am!" Shakespeare replied. "Bring me something – anything! – that might help my ideas flow from the depths of my perishable brain to the tip of this simple pen and become immortal ink!"

"Where is your kitchen?" Ernest asked.

"Down the hall, third door on the left," Shakespeare replied as he returned to his desk once more.

Eric joined Ernest at the door and together they explored the narrow corridors of the Globe theatre. The kitchen was easy enough to find, but it didn't resemble any kitchen Eric was used to. It was a dark, cold space, uninviting and creepy, with a long wooden bench at the centre. On the table was a selection of cheese, fruit and dark, thinly sliced ham. At one side, hanging from a metal rack, were two dead pigeons and a large piece of meat.

"This makes school dinners look a lot more tasty," Eric said as he curled up his nose.

Ernest inspected the food on the table. "Shakespeare will have tried all of this before. We must find him something new."

Eric thought quickly. "What if we mix it up?"

"Mix it up?" Ernest asked, his furry eyebrows squeezing his eyes into a frown.

Eric picked up a plate and grabbed the nearest item – an apple. "Let's give him a new combination. Apple with . . ." He scanned the room, then he grinned. "Apple and ham!" Feeling proud of himself, Eric picked up a slice of the dark meat and dropped it over the apple like a cloak.

Ernest shook his head. "Not original enough."

Eric's brain tingled, and he wasn't ready to give up on his idea just yet. "Okay, well, maybe if I slice the apple and make a tower with the meat?"

"Maybe," Ernest said doubtfully.

Eric found a knife and carefully sliced the apple. He made a little tower of ham and apple slices and stepped back to study his work. "It needs something else."

"Cucumber?" Ernest suggested, finding one on the table and handing it to Eric.

"Perfect!" Eric replied. He sliced the cucumber and added it to his growing pile of food, taking his time to make sure it was neat and tidy. He turned to Ernest.

"Better?"

"Better, but it still needs something more."

"It's not very easy to eat either," Eric noted. "It'd be better as a sandwich."

Ernest's face lit up. "A sandwich!" He looked around the kitchen until he found a hard, dry loaf of bread. He picked up the knife and carved two slices of bread and handed them to Eric.

Eric tested the bread, tapping the hard slice against the edge of the table. "It's not great bread, is it?"

"It doesn't have to be," Ernest replied with a broad grin.

Eric looked up from adding the bread to the apple, ham and cucumber pile. "Why not?"

"Because the sandwich hasn't been invented yet."

Eric laughed. "Someone invented the sandwich?"

"Yes," Ernest replied as he pulled a book from inside his giant pocket. He handed *The History of the Sandwich* to Eric. "It was invented by John Montagu, the 4th Earl of

Sandwich in 1762. He needed a way of eating things with his fingers while he was playing cards.

Eric flicked through the book. "Really?"

"Really," Ernest said.

"Do you think Shakespeare will like it?" Eric wondered as he handed the book back to his friend.

"It's perfect. The sandwich means that he can make an almost infinite combination of new things to eat. We just have to make sure he keeps it a secret, otherwise we'll be changing history."

"Would that mean that sandwiches would be called Shakespeares?" Eric wondered.

"Let's hope not," Ernest replied.

Eric picked up the sandwich. "Let's go find out."

Chapter 9

Eric marched back into Shakespeare's writing room with the plate held up in front of him. He plonked it down on the table and stepped back, grinning.

"What is this?" Shakespeare asked, staring in bewilderment at the tower of food.

"This is a sandwich," Ernest said.

"A sand . . . witch?" Shakespeare studied the plate. "I have met many hags and witches, some of the air, some of the sea, some from caves and cauldrons, but never one of the sands."

Eric shook his head. "No, you don't understand. It's just a name for things between two slices of bread."

Shakespeare laughed. "That is a nonsense name!"

"Then perhaps you have a better one?" Ernest suggested. He leaned closer to Eric and whispered, "He loves making up new words."

Shakespeare rubbed his beard. "'Tis breadbound, perhaps? No, not breadbound. A loafercoat? An overcoat for food made from bread." Shakespeare rolled the word around in his mouth, testing it out, but then he shook his head. "No, that won't do. This . . . this is . . . this is a breadfellow! The food and the bread lie beside each other like bedfellows, you see? Breadfellow!"

"That'll do," Eric replied.

"Very good," Shakespeare said with a smile. "Now, what on earth is this breadfellow?"

"It's a ham and apple and cucumber breadfellow," Ernest said, urging the playwright to try it.

Shakespeare shook his shiny head. "You think this might break my creative drought? No, sir, I have had all of these things before."

"Not as a sandwi . . . as a breadfellow," Eric said. "Try it."

"Where is a knife?" Shakespeare asked.

"Pick it up with your hands," Eric replied.

"That's barbaric!"

"Just try it," Ernest said.

"I will not like it," Shakespeare said.

"You won't know if you like it until you try it," Eric said, remembering Mr Milton's words to him about performing in the play.

Sceptically, Shakespeare picked up the breadfellow and took a bite. He closed his eyes, chewing the bread and the apple and the ham and the cucumber, and slowly his frowning face changed. "This is the devil's work!"

"You like it?" Eric asked him.

"Like it? No, my young friend, I do not like it." He took another bite. "I love it!"

Immediately, he found his quill pen and began to write.

"It's working," Eric whispered to Ernest.

Shakespeare continued to eat and write, speaking between bites. "This is astonishing! This breadfellow has solved my problem."

"And you can continue to have new things," Ernest explained. "All you have to do is put a few things between two slices of bread."

"Cheese and chocolate is a good one," Eric said. "Or crisps and salad cream."

"I like lettuce with tomato ketchup and cornflakes," Ernest confessed.

Eric pulled a disgusted face.

"An infinity of combinations!" Shakespeare exclaimed, showering Eric and Ernest in breadcrumbs. "I shall never tire of this. I will never lose my creativity again. This is a miracle! Everyone must know of the breadfellow!"

"No!" Ernest bellowed, banging his furry fist on the table.

Shakespeare stopped chewing, his eyes wide.

"You must never tell a soul. If you do, you will lose your creative spark forever," Ernest said in his deepest, most scary voice. "You must keep the breadfellow a secret."

"A secret?" Shakespeare gulped.

"Forever," Ernest boomed.

Shakespeare lowered his voice. "Is this some sort of magic?"

"The best sort of magic," Ernest reassured him. "If you break the spell, the rest of your hair will fall out, and all of your ideas will be boring."

Shakespeare grinned. "Very well! I will keep the breadfellow a secret. Tis a small price to pay if it means I can write my plays."

Eric leaned closer to Ernest. "Are we sure Shakespeare won't invent the sandwich?"

"I think he'll keep it to himself," Ernest replied with a wink.



Shakespeare wasn't listening, he had already finished a whole page of writing and was starting on a second. The sandwich – the breadfellow – was almost gone and he held up the plate. "More, please."

"What would you like?" Ernest asked.

"Surprise me!"

It was getting dark outside when Eric and Ernest returned from the kitchen for the ninth time and presented William Shakespeare with another new sandwich. Eric was particularly proud of this one: sliced onion with boiled egg and carrot. He pushed the plate towards Shakespeare, but he didn't look up from his work. Eric noticed that he hadn't even touched the last sandwich they had made for him.

"He's not hungry?" Eric whispered to Ernest.

"No one could still be hungry after what he's eaten this afternoon," Ernest replied, "but at least he's still writing."

Shakespeare stood up quickly and threw down his quill.

"Everything alright?" Eric asked, fearing that the Bard had ran out of ideas again.

But Shakespeare began to grin. "Tis done. My toil has produced a play of substance."

"You're finished?" Ernest asked.

Shakespeare jabbed a finger onto the pile of paper. "It is all here, another completed masterpiece. Now, we must rehearse, for the Queen will arrive in less than an hour."

"Is that enough time?" Eric wondered as Shakespeare led them towards the stage.

"It will have to do," he replied.

Waiting there was an odd assembly of actors who Shakespeare had summoned. As the playwright approached them, they stood to attention, awaiting his instructions.

"Players," Shakespeare said. "This play is a work of wonder which will be long remembered in the mind of our Queen."

There was a murmur of excitement from the actors.

"Indeed!" Shakespeare continued. "Our fair leader approaches! She expects to see a play worthy of her attention, and that is what we shall deliver. But time is not our friend. We have less than one hour to rehearse, refine and finesse this merry tale. But wait!" Shakespeare scanned the troupe, his eyes narrowing. "We are short! Where are Bernard and Ambrose?"

One of the actors stepped forward. "I'm sorry to say they slipped into the Thames."

Eric gasped and nudged Ernest. "They really need to clean up those slippery streets, don't they?"

Shakespeare began to pace back and forth. "There is no time to replace our false-footed friends. We cannot perform this play without them! All is lost!"

Eric exchanged a glance with Ernest, who nodded, smiling. Eric took in a deep breath and stepped forward. "Mr William, maybe me and Ernest could help?"

Chapter 10

Eric wasn't quite sure how it all happened so quickly, but the play was ready to perform by the time the Queen arrived and was led to her seat. Eric and Ernest watched from the edge of the stage as the assembled audience fell silent, anticipating the start of the show.

"The play begins," William Shakespeare whispered to Eric as he strode past him towards the stage. The crowd cheered as he waved to them. Shakespeare smiled as he took in their warm applause, then he bowed courteously to the Queen who was sat on the first level facing the stage.

Shakespeare cleared his throat. "My Queen, we are honoured that you have joined us on this fine evening to witness the birth of my new play. Tis called A *Midsummer Night's Dream*." He bowed again then he left the stage as the actors began to perform their parts.

Eric waited until it was his turn to perform. He was playing the part of Nick Bottom – the same part he had rehearsed for the school play, and Ernest was Oberon, the King of the Fairies. Having his best friend by his side seemed to make Eric's stage fright disappear, and he managed to remember all his lines.

Queen Elizabeth and the rest of the audience laughed at his performance, especially when he was dressed as a donkey, and the applause at the end of the play was deafening.

Eric and Ernest left the stage, grinning with excitement and found Shakespeare waiting to shake their hands.

"Well played, sirs," he said. "The blood of the theatre courses in your veins!"

"Thanks," Eric replied, not really knowing what he meant.

"Tis time to celebrate!" Shakespeare declared! "You will join us for feasting and drinking until dawn's light doth usher us to our rest?"

"Sorry, it's a school night," Eric replied, "and I think it's time we got back."

Ernest nodded. "Yes, time to go."

"Very well," Shakespeare said, sounding disappointed. "I wish you adieu."

Eric leaned in closer to Ernest and whispered, "A what?"

"Adieu," Ernest replied. "It's a French word meaning goodbye."

"Oh right! Adieu!" Eric said to William Shakespeare. "But before we go, can I ask you something?"

"You have more questions?" Shakespeare wondered.

Eric grinned, remembering Mr Milton's assignment. "What were your parents called? And do you have any children?"

"These are strange questions, my short friend," Shakespeare mused.

"I know, but my teacher wants to know."

"He is a fan as well?" Shakespeare asked.

Eric nodded quickly. "Yes!"

"Very well: my parents were called John and Mary."

"Was John your dad?" Eric interrupted as more questions clouded his mind.

"Of course he was!" Shakespeare said.

"What about your children?" Eric asked.

"I have had seven. Now, I really must get on. I presume your questions are complete?"

"Yes."

"Then I bid you adieu once more, young sir. I thank you and your furry companion for your assistance." Shakespeare bowed theatrically. "You are always welcome here at the Globe."

Eric bowed in return then he nodded to Ernest. It was time to go.

Ernest took his hand, then Eric gave his right ear a friendly rub and, in a whirl of colour they left the Globe, and the sixteenth century, behind.

"Eric?" a voice whispered from the darkness. "You're due on any second now!"

Eric was back at the side of the school stage, in the present day. Mr Milton was anxiously staring at him. "You're on, Eric!"

"I am?" he checked, feeling better.

"Yes! Do you know your lines?" Mr Milton asked him.

"I do," Eric said confidently.

"Then on you go," Mr Milton replied with a smile. "Shall I take your toy?"

Eric looked down at Ernest, who was the size and shape of a pencil case once more. "No, this is Ernest, he stays with me." Mr Milton looked confused, so Eric added, "He's my best friend."

Mr Milton didn't bother to argue. Instead, he herded Eric to the edge of the stage and gave him an encouraging push into the light.

Eric stood there, feeling completely alone. His mum and the rest of the audience were hidden behind the glare of the lights, but he knew they were there, waiting for him to speak. He could sense his mum out there, watching him, willing him on. He

felt a tremble in his legs, and he wanted to run away, but then he looked down at Ernest and he remembered his adventure with his best friend and William Shakespeare.

Eric smiled, and he knew exactly what to say.

Epilogue

Mr Milton watched with a growing sense of pride as his class bowed and left the stage. As the audience clapped and cheered the departing children, Mr Milton allowed himself a sigh of relief. Everyone had remembered their lines, even Eric Merrick who had seemed terrified just moments before he went on stage. In a flash, his fear seemed to disappear, and he had walked out onto the stage with confidence and comic timing. In fact, Eric had been so funny that he'd stolen the show.

The heavy curtains closed, and the stage became dark. Mr Milton followed the noise of excited chatter to find Eric Merrick and the rest of his class congratulating each other as they walked towards the cloak room.

"Well done, Eric," Mr Milton said as he caught up with the boy. "Did you enjoy it?"

"Yes," Eric said with a broad grin. "I think it might have been even better than the original."

Mr Milton laughed nervously. "The original?"

"Yes, when Shakespeare first did the play," Eric explained seriously. "I think he'd have enjoyed our version."

"Do you?"

Eric nodded quickly. "I'm certain of it." He turned to leave then stopped as he remembered something. "Oh yeah, I know the answer."

Mr Milton was puzzled. "Answer? To what?"

"To where Shakespeare got his ideas from." Eric explained. "He was inspired by different foods and when he ran out of things to try, he got so stressed that he couldn't come up with any new ideas and his hair started to fall out. But then he sort

of invented the sandwich, one hundred and sixty-three years before the Earl of Sandwich did, but Shakespeare called it a breadfellow, not a sandwich, and it was a secret. He loved drainpipes and his middle name was Enid."

"Oh. . . I see," Mr Milton lied. "Good."

"And Shakespeare's dad was called John and his mum was Mary," Eric continued without taking a breath. "And he had seven children. You wanted to know."

Mr Milton couldn't help but laugh.

Eric smiled. "Thanks for making us do this, Sir. I didn't think I'd like it, but it's been great."

Mr Milton watched as Eric ran to catch up with the other children. They laughed and shouted, talking over each other as they disappeared, and Mr Milton suddenly realised he was smiling.

Maybe, just maybe, he rather enjoyed being a History teacher after all, and, he realised with a chuckle, it was because of children like Eric Merrick.

END