

*Ben Jonson trundles onstage. Man is he drunk.
Also. Has he been crying?*

BEN. I cannot take it. I cannot and will not. I cannot do it, men.

ALICE. What's wrong with you, Ben?

HENRY. Are you well man?

BEN. Do grown men weep in public if they be well?

ALICE. We'll get you a drink.

BEN. I have been drunk for three days straight—

ALICE. No drink then.

BEN. —and without drink I will not last a fourth.

ALICE. Coming right up.

HENRY. Pity's sake, tell us what ills you, Ben.

BEN. William. Bloody. Shakespeare.

He starts to cry again, can't help it, trying to stop.

God help me, here I go again.

JOHN. Ben—sit—what on earth—?

BEN. I started your lines—some tepid praise, some “good man, good words, hey nonny nonny.” Then I said, let me read a play or two to remind myself. I set out at midnight, drag Crane from bed, “show me Shakespeare!”

Cries again, can't help it.

And I read everything.

Hates that he liked it so much.

That man. *Hamlet, Lear, Romeo and What's-Her-Name.*

ALICE. You read them all.

HENRY. And at once?

JOHN. That'd be too much for anyone.

BEN. I'd only ever *heard* the plays, *seen* them, never...*been alone with them.* And there I was. And there they were, these pinnacles of story, these peaks of heart, and I *hate* heart! The way he grows in the writing too. As a man himself. But even young the wisdom he put down. How did he know those things so young? How could he? God help me. I started drinking and haven't stopped since.

JOHN. Oh dear.

ALICE. Perhaps some food instead of ale.

HENRY. I know the feeling you're in, Ben. I do and I respect it. But I need to ask if you penned the lines yet?

BEN. What.

HENRY. The printing's almost done and we just need those few lines to say you knew him.

BEN. *Of course I knew him. I was with him the day before he...he died.*

I was there and I could've...

JOHN. Ben, no. It's not your fault.

BEN. What if it was, I could have stopped him.

JOHN. You couldn't have.

ALICE. It was a fever. What's to be done?

BEN. He was drinking *with me*, he was out *with me*. We gorged ourselves, we fought, we drank, we drank more. I could've sent him home, I didn't. Out from the Stratford pub hot and drunk and his steps outside and falls asleep in the snow. I find him half an hour later and he's...the fever was already in him. I could've...

JOHN. No, Ben. Release yourself from that.

BEN. I miss him. I miss the fight, I miss the work. I miss the work. The one we had and loved is gone.