

# *The Department of Famous Last Words*

A short play

By Jeffrey Wolf

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*Cast*

Julius Caesar

Male, 40s or 50s, the king of Rome

Oscar Wilde

Male, 30s or 40s, an Irish playwright

Elizabeth I

Female, 30s or 40s, the queen of England

Jeffrey

Male, 20s or 30s

*Setting:*

An office with four desks.

(At rise: an office with four desks. On the desks are a typewriter, computer, a pen and paper or even quills and parchment. Each desk has a tray with requisition forms stacked ridiculously high. JULIUS CAESAR and OSCAR WILDE sit at their desks. Each wears the clothes they often wore while alive, JULIUS in toga and OSCAR in a suit from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. JULIUS reads a form while OSCAR hunches over writing and crossing out.)

**JULIUS:**

The word is in. Our funding's been cut again.

**OSCAR:**

You've got to be kidding. What am I supposed to do? Open my veins for ink?

**JULIUS:**

You saw our last review. We haven't had a benchmark in nearly a decade.

**OSCAR:**

Yes. That was a stroke of genius, Jules. "Let's roll." Ruddy brilliant.

**JULIUS:**

Sometimes these things just come to me. I do have a spot of good news.

**OSCAR:**

Oh?

**JULIUS:**

We're getting that empty position filled today.

**OSCAR:**

Took their bloody time about it.

**JULIUS:**

Elizabeth is down getting his paperwork sorted out now. Jeff something.

**OSCAR:**

Sounds English.

**JULIUS:**

No, American.

**OSCAR:**

Oh, bugger.

**JULIUS:**

He might not be that bad. He's apparently a writer.

**OSCAR:**

Remember Tom? Waxing on and on.

**JULIUS:**

Jefferson had his issues, but I think this one might work out.

**OSCAR:**

You're too trusting, Jules. It's why you're always getting stabbed in the back.

**JULIUS:**

I won't dignify that with a response, Oscar.

(ELIZABETH I and JEFFREY enter.  
ELIZABETH wears one of her majestic  
dresses. JEFFREY is in jeans and a  
sweatshirt.)

**ELIZABETH:**

It's not much, but we've tried to make it like home.

**JULIUS:**

Morning, Elizabeth.

**OSCAR:**

Morning, Liz.

**JULIUS:**

(To JEFFREY:)

Pleasure to meet you. I'm Julius Caesar.

**JEFFREY:**

Excuse me?

**OSCAR:**

Welcome to the FLW. Name's Oscar, Oscar Wilde.

**JEFFREY:**

Did you just say? And you said – As in *the* Julius Caesar? And she's really Queen Elizabeth?

**OSCAR:**

(To ELIZABETH:)

I imagine at some point his eloquence will improve?

**ELIZABETH:**

He's still a bit fuddled. They rushed him up here.

**JEFFREY:**

I'm just — a little confused about what — where am I again?

**JULIUS:**

We are the Department of Famous Last Words.

**OSCAR:**

As I said, the FLW.

**JULIUS:**

No one really calls it that but him.

**ELIZABETH:**

It's quite a privilege to be here.

**JULIUS:**

*(To JEFFREY:)*

You should feel very proud.

**JEFFREY:**

Sure — So, by famous last words you mean —

**OSCAR:**

We get dozens of requisitions each day.

**JULIUS:**

They come with the situation, name, bit of background.

**ELIZABETH:**

And we write them a bit of poetry to say before they go.

**JEFFREY:**

I always thought people came up with those —

**JULIUS:**

On their own? By Jove, what a disaster that would be.

**ELIZABETH:**

It can happen.

**OSCAR:**

But it's rare.

**ELIZABETH:**

That's why you're here.

**JULIUS:**

You came up with your own and snagged the attention of the folks upstairs.

**ELIZABETH:**

We are sure yours were really fine.

**JULIUS:**

And what we do is really rewarding.

**ELIZABETH:**

Living on while helping others also capture that bit of immortality.

(A beat.)

**OSCAR:**

So, what were yours then?

(JEFFREY looks at them blankly.)

**ELIZABETH:**

Your last words, dear.

**OSCAR:**

Your last utterances before you shuffled off that mortal coil.

**JEFFREY:**

What I said was famous?

**OSCAR:**

I do believe that's what we've been saying, yes.

**JEFFREY:**

*(Embarrassed:)*

No, it really wasn't. Trust me –

**JULIUS:**

Come now, don't be modest.

**ELIZABETH:**

We're sure they were lovely, dear.

**JEFFREY:**

No, I — you really —

**OSCAR:**

Think you're too good for us, then?

**ELIZABETH:**

Don't be like that, Oscar.

**OSCAR:**

Be like what? He's being the prat.

**ELIZABETH:**

Maybe if we shared ours first? Ours aren't as well known, but they were quite nice. "All my possessions for a moment of time."

**JULIUS:**

A real gem, Liz. (*To JEFFREY:*) And you must know mine.

**JEFFREY:**

Uh — yes — of course.

**OSCAR:**

And mine.

**JEFFREY:**

Er — I'm sure I've...

**OSCAR:**

"Either that wallpaper goes, or I do."

**ELIZABETH:**

Still gives us the chills.

**JULIUS:**

Bravo.

**JEFFREY:**

Wait, Mr. Caesar — Didn't Shakespeare write yours?

**OSCAR:**

Bloody hell. Everyone knows about Bill, don't they? Don't see him here though, do you?

**ELIZABETH:**

It's so sad how some people turn out.

**JULIUS:**

I'd rather not talk about Will. Plagiarism is not tolerated here.

**ELIZABETH:**

It can be quite embarrassing for us.

**OSCAR:**

Next thing you know, different people are all using the same last words.

**JULIUS:**

It would be utter chaos.

**ELIZABETH:**

We don't want that, do we?

**JEFFREY:**

So you write everyone's last words?

**OSCAR:**

Good God! Not everyone!

**ELIZABETH:**

It would be rather difficult if that were the case.

**OSCAR:**

We'd write our hands off. I'd be Oscar the Handless.

**JULIUS:**

We have an application process. It's quite lengthy, but worth it in the end. Otherwise we'd resort to a lot of "ouch" or "ack."

**OSCAR:**

Or "I'll be right back." Rather beneath us, really.

**ELIZABETH:**

Not everyone's last words are of note, dear. But those who are legendary during life can be so in death.

**OSCAR:**

Could you imagine what would happen if we weren't here? What if Bogart had said something about crumpets instead of scotch and martinis?

**JULIUS:**

That was Liz's. "I should never have switched from scotch to martinis." It's a shame so many people can't be trusted. I've been doing this for nearly 2,000 years and I've seen some huge disappointments.

**JEFFREY:**

I'd at least want some input on mine.

**JULIUS:**

Asking people wouldn't work.

**ELIZABETH:**

It's not like there's much time, dear. We know about it in advance, but to those who are going –



**OSCAR:**

It's worse when people try to plan ahead. Comes out ridiculous.

**JULIUS:**

Chekhov tried that. Poor, poor man.

**ELIZABETH:**

Writers always feel they know better.

**JULIUS:**

"I am dying. I haven't drunk champagne for a long time."

**OSCAR:**

Really, such a serious writer blithering on about champagne.

**JEFFREY:**

You were talking about wallpaper.

**OSCAR:**

But that fits me in the grand scheme of things, doesn't it?

**ELIZABETH:**

We know it seems like we're treating them like children, but it's for the best.

**JULIUS:**

Now, we're ready for yours.

**JEFFREY:**

But I — really — they're not — worthy.

**OSCAR:**

Americans.

**JEFFREY:**

I'm telling the truth. They were — well — stupid.

**ELIZABETH:**

Surely not.

**JEFFREY:**

But — It's embarrassing.

**OSCAR:**

Genius is born, not paid.

**JULIUS:**

Give the boy a minute, Oscar.

**ELIZABETH:**

They can't be that bad.

**JEFFREY:**

What if they really do suck? What if there's been some mistake?

**OSCAR:**

Then you'll get sacked, won't you?

**JEFFREY:**

What does that mean?

**JULIUS:**

It's policy. You get moved "downstairs."

(OSCAR opens a desk drawer and pulls out a large pad of pink Post It notes.)

**JULIUS (CONT.):**

Now really, Oscar, I was going to get to that.

**JEFFREY:**

What are those?

**JULIUS:**

We used to use pink slips, but those have gone out of fad.

**ELIZABETH:**

Now we use Post It notes.

**OSCAR:**

I just like that they're pink.

**JULIUS:**

There's no place in the FLW for bad writing.

**OSCAR:**

Ah ha! Got you Jules! You said FLW!

**JULIUS:**

Really, Oscar, not now.

**ELIZABETH:**

Oh don't worry Jeffrey, you'll still get to write.

**OSCAR:**

If you can call it that.

**JULIUS:**

You'll be writing copy for telemarketers.

**JEFFREY:**

*(Afraid to ask:)*

What are they selling?

**OSCAR:**

Time shares.

**JEFFREY:**

No!

**JULIUS:**

It really is hell.

**OSCAR:**

Enough. *(He looks at his watch.)* We can only give you one more minute.

**JEFFREY:**

So time share telemarketers come from –

**ELIZABETH:**

You're running out of time, dear.

**JEFFREY:**

*(Alarmed:)*

Right, my last words! I — uh — yeah they were great!

**ELIZABETH:**

Wonderful!

**JEFFREY:**

Uh — "I'm bored with it all."

**JULIUS:**

That was Churchill. Wrote that myself.

**JEFFREY:**

Right — sorry, it was actually, "Good night my darlings, I'll see you tomorrow."

**OSCAR:**

Come now, I wrote that for Noel Coward.

**JEFFREY:**

*(Meekly:)*

"A dying man can do nothing easy."

**ELIZABETH:**

Ben Franklin.

**JEFFREY:**

“O’ I die Horatio.”

(OSCAR scribbles on a Post It note and tears it off. He marches toward JEFFREY.)

**OSCAR:**

Time’s up.

**JEFFREY:**

But – a piano fell on my head! I was standing there sorting through junk mail and I looked up and – all I could think of was this ad where you lose weight while watching a scary movie while blowing up an inflatable goat. It can’t – Here!

(JEFFREY leans over and whispers in ELIZABETH’S ear.)

**ELIZABETH:**

Oh dear.

(ELIZABETH whispers in JULIUS’ ear. His eyes widen and he whispers in OSCAR’S ear.)

**OSCAR:**

My God!

**JEFFREY:**

I know. I’m sorry.

**JULIUS:**

You’re definitely fired now.

**ELIZABETH:**

We thought we’d gotten these clerical errors resolved.

**OSCAR:**

Before you go, any last words?

(Blackout.)