

DEPOSITION

a play in three acts

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CHARACTERS

ANNIE, Nelson's wife; 30s or 40s

NELSON, Annie's husband; a few years younger

ZORA, a nurse; Nelson's age. She has faint, branching scars by one ear.

TIME

The near future.

PLACE

In and around Annie and Nelson's home. Occasionally, a hospital.

A nearly dry river crosses the stage. Other settings are minimal: a bed consisting of pillows and a blanket, and chairs and props as needed.

I

(Lights up to reveal NELSON, at center, lying unconscious on his back. On one side, ZORA sits reading the Bible. On the other side, ANNIE faces the audience)

ANNIE

When we first moved here, even, the river was never a river. A tributary of a tributary, though it was water, at least—a steady flow to the sea, especially after a rainstorm. A stream if not a river, a creek if not a stream, though these terms, as I understand them, lack official definitions. And rainstorms are rare. But it was our river. I recommend them to lakes, say, or oceans, and not simply because oceans are three-point-five percent salt. By an ocean, one experiences stasis. I understand about tides and evaporation, but the human eye opens each morning to find nothing has changed. The shoreline creeps forward and back, the current pulls and releases—as it is today, so tomorrow, so et cetera.

Now a river does not do this. A river flows. Like time. And even if you want to be still—if you plant your legs deep in the muck and steel your back—things flow past you. And sometimes the balance between the momentum of a thing and gravity shifts, and the thing is left behind. This process of sinking and settling is called deposition, and we associate it mainly with stones and other sediments. But the river can leave behind many things.

(ANNIE picks up a large bone—femur-shaped and smoothed by flowing water. She studies it for a moment, then looks for the first time at NELSON)

ANNIE (Cont'd)

Nelson! Baby, look what I found.

(He does not respond. She crosses to him)

ANNIE (Cont'd)

Nelson?

(She places her ear on his chest; she shakes him, but still he lies motionless. ZORA closes her Bible and watches)

ANNIE (Cont'd)

HELP!

(ZORA stands. The scene changes to NELSON's hospital room)

ZORA
Can I get you anything?

ANNIE
No. Like what?

ZORA
Something to eat?

ANNIE
No.

ZORA
Drink?

ANNIE
Maybe.

ZORA
Ice water?

ANNIE
You must have something stronger than ice water.

ZORA
We have coffee.

ANNIE
I like lots of cream and sugar.

ZORA
Me too.

(ZORA starts to exit)

ANNIE
Miss!

ZORA
Zora, please.

ANNIE
I'd also like ice water. Thank you.

(ZORA exits. ANNIE stands and looks around)

ANNIE (Cont'd)

This is a very nice hospital, Nelson. You have a view of the river. A river. Ours is drier. They have ducks.

(ZORA re-enters with coffee and water)

ZORA

There's plenty more cream and sugar, if you'd like.

ANNIE

How long will he—do you think ...?

ZORA

Shall I get the doctor?

ANNIE

I heard him. In your experience ...?

ZORA

Every coma is different. He was fortunate you found him so quickly.

ANNIE

Then why isn't he better?

ZORA

Cardiac arrest stops the flow of oxygen to the brain. Cells begin to die. At some point, a line is crossed. But we can't know where that line is for your husband.

ANNIE

We can only wait. Pray for a miracle.

ZORA

Would you like to pray?

ANNIE

I was just ... I'm not religious.

ZORA

If you need anything, ever, press this button.

(ZORA demonstrates)

ANNIE

You said "Zora"?

ZORA

Yes.

ANNIE

Annie.

ZORA

I'm sorry we can't meet under happier circumstances, Annie.

ANNIE

You have a very nice hospital. I might feed the ducks.

ZORA

Discreetly.

(ZORA exits. ANNIE splashes the water on NELSON's face)

ANNIE (Cont'd)

WAKE UP!

(Blackout.

When lights return, NELSON lies comatose as before. ZORA moves around him, performing a routine neurological examination. Upstage, ANNIE stands in the river, occasionally kneeling to search the riverbed)

ANNIE (Cont'd)

Nelson proposed to me here. Almost this very spot. The water was higher then, but we were daring. In love, and willing to catch cold to prove it. We were chasing tadpoles, or trout, or each other, and suddenly he took my hand and dropped to one knee—I thought he had a cramp, but nope, he reached into his jacket pocket and took out a ring. Whereupon he really did cramp, and the ring plopped into the river, never to surface again. I had no idea at the time this was part of a pattern of muscle failure.

(She gasps and grabs something, but it is only a piece of wire)

If I put this back where I found it, is it litter?

(She sighs and pockets the wire)

We took care to be married on dry land. And the water level has fallen ever since. Is the river punishing itself for its theft? Protecting us from ourselves? Or maybe it's the goddamn drought.

(ANNIE steps out of the river and enters the hospital room as ZORA concludes her examination)

ZORA

No change in symptoms.

ANNIE
Should I expect any?

ZORA
People recover.

ANNIE
God willing.

ZORA
God willing.

ANNIE
Are you praying for my husband?

ZORA
Excuse me?

(ANNIE picks up ZORA's Bible from her chair)

ANNIE
I don't want you reading to my comatose husband!

ZORA
I wasn't—

ANNIE
—You can read in the nurse's station, you can read in church, you can read while you're sitting on the toilet, but this is my husband's room, and you will respect that!

ZORA
I'll leave you alone. I'm sorry.

(ZORA takes her Bible and exits. ANNIE sits beside NELSON and strokes his hair)

ANNIE
(suddenly)
Do you mind if I smoke? I promise if you come back to me I'll quit.

(She kisses him, walks outside, and lights a cigarette. Wearing street clothes, ZORA exits the hospital. ANNIE spots her as she passes)

ANNIE (Cont'd)
Are you off for the night?

ZORA

Yes. You can't be smoking here.

ANNIE

I'm sorry.

(She puts out the cigarette)

I'm sorry about before.

ZORA

No, I shouldn't have ... I'd like to explain. I have not been reading the Bible to your husband. I've been praying for him, yes—I pray for all my patients. Privately.

ANNIE

Then why—

ZORA

—I don't want you to misunderstand. God hasn't blessed me with the gift of prophecy. I don't usually have visions. But the moment I first saw your husband, I had a feeling—I mean, I heard God's voice, like a whisper, but unmistakably ... Annie ... this man is going to live. To awaken.

(ANNIE stares but says nothing)

ZORA (Cont'd)

Would you like some gum?

ANNIE

Yes.

(ZORA gives ANNIE a piece of gum and takes one for herself. They chew silently for a moment)

ZORA

I'll come to the point.

ANNIE

That wasn't the point?

ZORA

I'm trying to explain—in quiet moments on my shift, I'll sometimes sit with your husband, in his room—not to say or do anything, but to be there ... if he awakens. I'd be reading my Bible anyway. At the nurse's station. Or the toilet. Do you understand?

ANNIE

That's a very complicated question.

ZORA
Are you angry?

ANNIE
I don't see why I should be.

ZORA
Either way, it won't happen again.

ANNIE
I don't believe you heard God's voice.

ZORA
Do you believe in God?

ANNIE
No.

ZORA
Did you ever?

ANNIE
Does it matter?

ZORA
I think loss of faith is more regrettable.

ANNIE
Were you raised to be a Christian?

ZORA
Yes.

ANNIE
Well, if you'll excuse me for saying—and I think I'm entitled to say whatever I want right now, regardless—but I think that's regrettable.

ZORA
Why on earth—

ANNIE
—Suppose we could reverse our positions, and you were raised by my parents, and I was raised by yours. There's a very good chance that today you would be the atheist.

ZORA
I very much doubt that.

ANNIE

All right, let's say your parents were Pakistani or Israeli or Navajo. My point is for most people, they inherit their religion no differently than eye color.

ZORA

Even if you're correct, then I should call my being born into a Christian home a blessing.

ANNIE

And if you were born into a Muslim home, you'd call that a blessing. Don't you see it's arbitrary? And what I find regrettable is the idea that a person might go her whole life without having any say in her most cherished beliefs. At least the loss of faith is intentional. You compare what you were taught with what you see and hear and feel, and you decide they don't match up.

ZORA

But if you were taught not to believe—

ANNIE

—I was taught to make my own choices.

ZORA

Then why do you assume, if your parents had been mine, I wouldn't have chosen Christ?

ANNIE

Why did you choose Christ?

ZORA

I see Him in the world. I feel Him in my heart. I'm sorry you don't.

ANNIE

Please don't be sorry for me.

ZORA

I should go home. Feed Paulie.

ANNIE

Who?

ZORA

My dog. Good night, Annie.

(ZORA exits. Blackout.)

When lights return, ANNIE is sitting beside the river)

ANNIE

One summer when I was six, my friend invited me to her family's beach house. It was every bit the transformative experience you'd expect, and when I returned home, I told my parents I wanted a beach of my own. They laughed, as grownups do, but when I insisted, my father led me outside—we lived on the edge of a big, grassy field, and surrounding the field was a forest, and surrounding the forest were more fields—so you can see why I was taken with my friend's aquatic lifestyle. My father explained that the ground we were standing on—miles and miles in every direction—had once been covered by a great, salt sea. And once, en route to some distant port, a Spanish galleon had sprung a leak and sunk above this very spot. My father told me to run and get a shovel—I sprinted, sprinted back, and started digging. Within five minutes, I'd dug up a golden coin. And then another. And then two more.

(She takes a golden coin from her pocket)

At various moments in my life when I have needed luck, I've tossed one in a well or a fountain or puddle and made a wish.

(Closing her eyes, she kisses the coin and throws it in the river. When she opens her eyes, she notices something in the riverbed. She jumps down to investigate and uncovers a hand-carved, brownish doll.

In the hospital, NELSON awakens with a gasp. He stares wildly, disoriented.

A telephone rings. ANNIE listens; then, clutching the doll, she climbs out of the river and crosses to the hospital. ZORA enters in her uniform)

ANNIE

You called me—

ZORA

—It's a miracle, Annie!

(ANNIE pulls away from ZORA)

ZORA (Cont'd)

I'll be here if he needs anything.

(Alone, ANNIE enters NELSON's room. For a long moment, no one moves)

NELSON

What happened?

ANNIE

You've been gone a month.

NELSON
I've—hours.

ANNIE
Nelson, it's been thirty days.

NELSON
I don't ...

ANNIE
Never mind.

(She embraces him)

NELSON
There was a river ...

ANNIE
Yes, our river.

NELSON
Beyond.

(She pulls away. He notices the doll)

NELSON (Cont'd)
What's this?

ANNIE
I don't know. I found it just before I came here.

NELSON
Where?

ANNIE
Half-buried in the river. Ours.

(He takes the doll)

ANNIE (Cont'd)
When they called to tell me you had ... I didn't even realize I was still—

NELSON
—Can I have this?

ANNIE

Nelson, it's filthy.

(He presses the call button)

ANNIE (Cont'd)

No, let me throw it out. Here, just give me—

(ZORA enters)

ZORA

How are you feeling?

NELSON

Will you please wash this?

(He hands ZORA the doll)

ZORA

A katsina doll?

ANNIE

You know what this is?

ZORA

I think so. It's pretty weathered.

NELSON

Katsina?

ZORA

A protective spirit. To the Hopi.

ANNIE

We don't live near any Hopi.

ZORA

You can buy them online. The dolls. They're sort of collectors' items. But originally they were made for ceremonies.

ANNIE

What ceremonies?

ZORA

All kinds. Fertility, harvest, rain.

NELSON
Will you wash it? Miss?

ZORA
Zora.

ANNIE
Nelson, she's busy.

NELSON
Please?

ZORA
I'll see what I can do.

(ZORA exits with the doll)

NELSON
I'm tired.

ANNIE
Oh. Well, sleep. Nelson ...?

(He looks at her)

ANNIE (Cont'd)
I love you.

NELSON
I'm glad you're here.

(He sleeps. She sits beside him and holds his hand. The day passes.)

ZORA re-enters with the doll)

ANNIE
Shhh ...

(ZORA nods. She walks quietly to the bed and places the doll beside NELSON, then whispers to ANNIE)

ZORA
Rubbing alcohol. Lots.

(ZORA exits. ANNIE follows her into the hallway)

ANNIE
Were you with him when he woke up?

ZORA
I was not.

ANNIE
Because I chased you away?

ZORA
I realized it was inappropriate.

ANNIE
I see. I—

ZORA
—Also at the time I was eating.

ANNIE
Thank you for taking care of him.

ZORA
You're very welcome.

(In his room, NELSON awakens. He notices the doll)

ANNIE
Is there a pamphlet or something I can read?

ZORA
A pamphlet?

ANNIE
I feel like if I say or do something wrong, I'll lose him again.

ZORA
What could you say or do wrong?

ANNIE
I don't know, that's why I need a pamphlet.

ZORA
Just trust yourself to be there for him.

(ANNIE nods. ZORA exits. ANNIE returns to NELSON's side)

ANNIE
Hi.

NELSON
(holding up the doll)
I know this.

ANNIE
Zora cleaned it.

NELSON
Across the river.

ANNIE
Down the hall.

NELSON
Annie ... The afterlife is a river. Like a continent, wide, but I could see the other side. It was beautiful. I can't describe how beautiful. Like paradise. Like home.

ANNIE
Yes, Nelson, home. We're going home.

NELSON
I couldn't cross. I couldn't find a way to cross. I've never felt so far ... and I was close! On the opposite shore something beckoned to me—silent, graceful gestures—and I screamed. I screamed *Help me!* But no response. I walked up and down, I looked everywhere, but wherever I stood, the distance between myself and the figure was the same. And always it beckoned, gracefully, silently.

ANNIE
It was a dream.

NELSON
It felt real.

(She embraces him again. He pulls away)

NELSON (Cont'd)
Annie, listen to me. Dying isn't painful.

ANNIE
You didn't die, you were—

NELSON

—Dead. Electricity in my veins, a flash, and darkness. A month of darkness, maybe, but when I opened my eyes there was a river.

ANNIE

When you opened your eyes you were here.

NELSON

(shaking the doll)

This is what I saw. What beckoned to me.

ANNIE

What?

NELSON

From across the river.

ANNIE

The river ... wide like a continent, from across that river, you saw—

NELSON

—Yes!

ANNIE

Nelson, this is a doll!

NELSON

I know what I saw.

ANNIE

You were dreaming.

NELSON

I was there!

ANNIE

YOU WERE IN A FUCKING COMA!

(stepping back)

I'm sorry, I need—you should rest. I'll go home, I'll get things ready, I'll make bread—the food here stinks—

NELSON

—Wait—

ANNIE

—I'll make bread and let you rest.

(She rushes outside and breathes deeply. ZORA approaches)

ANNIE
He's having nightmares.

ZORA
He's safe now.

ANNIE
He never used to.

ZORA
We all have nightmares.

ANNIE
I want him home.

(ANNIE exits. Blackout.)