

By The River

A ten-minute play by

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Synopsis:

An aging, Trump-hating actress, who considers herself homeless, finds ‘her’ park bench occupied by a real homeless man and learns a few things.

Characters:

Ethel an actress, 60 +

Man-In-Hoody a former stockbroker, now homeless, early 40s

Time: fall 2018

Place: Riverside Park in Manhattan

BY THE RIVER

A red sun is setting over the Hudson. ETHEL, wearing sweatpants and carrying a big shoulder bag, is sitting on 'her' bench in Riverside Park. The sun is painting a glowing path to the Jersey side. ETHEL walks over, bends over the railing, and stares into the water.

ETHEL

Jesus! What is this?

(She bends over further)

It's just a rock. It's just a rock. Looks like a body for God' sake. How do you drown yourself if you know how to swim? Virginia put rocks in her pockets. Natalie was murdered, I'm sure; she must have known how to swim. Crazy Crane dove from an ocean liner. That I can see, being sucked down by the machinery.

(she spreads out her arms, quotes the Queen from Hamlet)

"Her clothes spread wide, and, mermaid-like, awhile they bore her up; which time she chanted snatches of old lauds"

She sings a bit of Maury Yeston's *BY THE RIVER*

"People will be born, people will die, as before you were born and long after you ..."

(quoting Dickinson)

*"How the Waters closed above Him
We shall never know --
How He stretched His Anguish to us
That -- is covered too --"*

Suddenly the setting sun disappears. A deep shadow spreads. ETHEL turns back to her bench. A figure in a hoody is sitting on the bench. ETHEL, startled, turns to walk away.

MAN-IN-HOODY

Hey! Lady!

ETHEL keeps walking. The man jumps in front of her. She stands frozen for a second then starts jumping up and down, hitting him with her pocketbook, yelling at the top of her lungs.

ETHEL

Help! Help! Help! Heeeelp!

MAN-IN-HOODY

(grabs her by both wrists)

Shut up! What's the matter with you?

ETHEL

I don't have any money. I'm an actor. Why don't you rob somebody on Park Avenue!

MAN-IN-HOODY

I don't want money. Calm down! I just need a little water.

(he lets go of her wrists)

I thought you might have a bottle in that big bag of yours.

ETHEL

Jesus!

MAN-IN-HOODY

Jesus is right.

ETHEL

I thought you were a robber.

MAN-IN-HOODY

Parched is what I am.

ETHEL

You scared the hell out of me. The hoody and all.

MAN-IN-HOODY

You're a racist?

ETHEL pulls a bottle out of her bag and hands it to him. He takes a big swallow, sits down on the bench.

ETHEL

I'm not a racist.

(she sits next to him)

MAN-IN-HOODY

You're one angry woman.

(a long silence)

Do you have any food?

No! – Wait.

ETHEL

She rummages in her bag, hands him a power bar.

You homeless?

MAN-IN-HOODY

Maybe. Sort of.

ETHEL

Maybe sort of?

(she chuckles)

Hm. So am I, maybe sort of. Where do you sleep nights?

MAN-IN-HOODY

(vaguely)

Here and there - up – near 119th. - underpass. You don't want the shelter, believe me.

ETHEL

Sleeping out in the open. I can't imagine.

He suddenly snatches her bag, holds it out of her reach. Slowly hands it back.

MAN-IN-HOODY

Just kidding.

ETHEL

Very funny.

She holds her bag pressed against her stomach both arms around it.

So, you sleep outside? How can you fall asleep? I have trouble falling asleep on my daughter's couch. Isn't it scary?

MAN-IN-HOODY

Can be. You know what, this one place – not a shelter – it's a fucking sanctuary. There are buddies, there are stars in the sky. Not everything comes down to money and real estate. That's all that poor shit in the White House knows.

ETHEL

I wouldn't call him poor.

MAN-IN-HOODY

Hollow, call him hollow, an empty shell, an airbag, a nothing.

ETHEL

More than nothing: mean, malicious, vicious, vindictive, vile, venomous,
(really getting into it)
 cruel, disgusting, absolutely disgusting, an egocentric, egotistical, narcissistic, misogynistic son-of-a-bitch!

MAN-IN-HOODY

You're really getting off on this, aren't you?

ETHEL

I want him dead.

(she shakes her head)

And not just him, his whole family. Like the Romanovs. You know?

MAN-IN- HOODY

Have them assassinated?

ETHEL

Why not? Baron! I wonder he didn't call him Tsar, or Prince, or King. Just Baron? I want them all dead. Including his son-in-law, especially his son-in-law.

MAN-IN-HOODY

Why him?

ETHEL

He harasses tenants, the greedy son-of-a-bitch, to get them out of their stabilized apartments. Falsifies records, bribes inspectors.

MAN-IN-HOODY

That's just business. Routine. You'd be surprised.

ETHEL

I don't get it. People voting this disgusting bully into the highest office in the land. In the world, come to think of it. Or used to be. Are we still number one with this retard at the helm?

MAN-IN-HOODY

He's no retard. He's very smart. You can't get / to the

ETHEL

He's an emotional and intellectual retard. He doesn't care what world he leaves to his grandchildren. He has grandchildren for Christ sake. He has no empathy. None! And his sons, hunting tigers in India. In this day and age. Unbelievable! They should be skinned alive, put over the mantle.

(the man stares at her)

His sons, not the tigers. Fricking adulterer. Everybody else has to resign. What happened to ME TOO? Why does it apply to everybody except this disgusting fish mouth? Why is he always let off? He gets accused but is never prosecuted. I want him dead! Isn't it awful? I used to be a pacifist. A flowerchild. Make love, not war.

MAN-IN-HOODY

You're crazy.

ETHEL

And not just die. I want him to suffer, be shamed, stripped naked, castrated - yeah castrated, publicly, that's it, absolutely, paraded about, laughed at. The man with the little hands. Ha-ha-ha!

MAN-IN-HOODY

I think there is a clinical name for it. Can't think of what it is. What did you mean you were maybe homeless?

(she doesn't answer)

You don't look homeless.

ETHEL takes a sip of water, gets up and points at a building on Riverside Drive, counts down.

ETHEL

See that building, the one with the big tree near the entrance? One, two, three, third corner-window from the top. My daughter lives there. I sleep on the couch. My son-in-law wants me gone yesterday. The building thinks I'm visiting. From Europe! That's a laugh. I haven't been to Europe in thirty years.

MAN-IN-HOODY

So what's the problem?

ETHEL

They don't allow three people in a one-bedroom apartment. If I jumped out of that window, I'd splash right at their fancy entrance. I wonder if it's high enough? I wouldn't want to survive and be crippled.

MAN-IN-HOODY

Are you contemplating suicide?

ETHEL

Not really. I don't know why I do that.

MAN-IN-HOODY

Do what?

ETHEL

Talk about killing myself. I would never do it. I wouldn't do that to my daughter. And especially not to my granddaughter. She has death anxieties. A teen with death anxieties. I blame the mayor.

MAN-IN-HOODY

For her anxieties?

ETHEL

No, for rezoning. They offered me money to move. Idiot me refused. I loved my place. I'd been there forever. Stupid, stupid asshole me, I didn't take the offer; next thing I know the building is condemned.

She passes him the water bottle, they sit in silence looking straight out, after a while.

MAN-IN-HOODY

Do you have any money? I know you said you didn't but I've heard brokers who pull down millions say the same thing.

ETHEL

(turns to stare at him)

You were a broker?

He doesn't respond. She checks her wallet, gives him a dollar bill. He keeps his hand stretched out. She puts one more in it, then two more.

What happened?

MAN-IN-HOODY

Stuff. Drugs. I just wasn't cut out for the rat race.

ETHEL

No kidding.

MAN-IN-HOODY

My wife got me into rehab. After about the fifth time she gave up on me. I miss her. You know something, missing can be as good as having. Better.

ETHEL

You're the one who's crazy. How can you be so positive? Glass half full no matter what?

MAN-IN-HOODY

I don't know. Maybe my nature. Nature period. Look!

(points to the walkway)

Grass growing through concrete. There's always tomorrow, unimaginable fortunes looming. I thought I was immune; thought I could / always control

ETHEL

Looming? You slipped up there.

MAN-IN-HOODY

I meant possible. Waiting. Possibly waiting for you. Anything's possible. If you can imagine it, it's possible. Who said that?

ETHEL

Strasberg.

MAN-IN-HOODY

Who?

ETHEL

Lee Strasberg. My acting guru of yore.

MAN-IN-HOODY

Never heard of him. How come you're so miserable?

ETHEL

Work, I guess, not enough work. Things bother me half as much when I'm working.

MAN-IN-HOODY

That's the one thing I don't miss - the rat race.

ETHEL

I feel awful when I'm not working. Like I'm nothing. My family doesn't value what I do. I don't blame them. I'm an actress.

MAN-IN-HOODY

So you said. Have I seen you in anything?

ETHEL

You tell me. My daughter is making damn sure Lilly doesn't go into showbiz. She's right of course; it's a terrible business. I am inconsequential. What good do I do in the world? I can't bear to think of the children. It just kills me thinking of the children. At the border being taken from their families, toddlers, babies, put in cages, lost track of? Can you imagine?

MAN-IN-HOODY

I don't listen to the news.

ETHEL

It's like an addiction. Every ten minutes after the hour I tune into Public Radio for the news summary.

MAN-IN-HOODY

I don't listen to the news.

ETHEL

I'll tell you a story. When I was in first grade - maybe it was second - I know I was in school already. That's in Europe after the war, mind you. My family had nothing to eat. They sent me to live with a well-to-do aunt, my father's sister, who was married to a Nazi.

I was so traumatized, I thought I'd die from homesickness. And that's with a kind relative, a half an hour away from home. I never said boo, never complained. I couldn't admit that I was homesick. It haunts me to this day.

I slept on this big blue sofa under a huge painting, some pastoral scene of a golden wheatfield with poppies and bluebottles along the edges. It had a gilded frame, thick, ornate gilded frame. I thought it would come crashing down on me in my sleep. I cried every night in the dark.

I don't know how long I was there. Probably just a few weeks. Maybe a few months.

Can you imagine, a five-year old, a seven-year-old, taken from her mother? Toddlers, babies! The cruelty of it. Do you have children?

MAN-IN-HOODY

(stands up, moves to leave)

I have to go.

ETHEL

Wait. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to

(she shouts after him)

Opioids!

MAN-IN HOODY

(turns around)

What about them?

ETHEL

How do you get them?

MAN-IN-HOODY

He looks at her, slowly sits back down. There is a moment of silence then we hear the sound of the river. It increases, gets very loud and suddenly stops.

end of play