

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 present

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 with pillows and a blanket, two chairs, and props as needed.

I

Lights up to reveal NELSON, at center, lying unconscious on his back. On one side ZORA, in her uniform, 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.

Can I get you anything? ZORA

No. Like what? ANNIE

Something to eat? ZORA

No. ANNIE

Drink? ZORA

Maybe. ANNIE

Ice water? ZORA

You must have something stronger than ice water. ANNIE

We have coffee. ZORA

I like lots of cream and sugar. ANNIE

Me too. ZORA

ZORA starts to exit.

Miss! ANNIE

Zora, please. ZORA

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

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. Geese? 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

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. This very spot, almost. 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 to my husband?

ZORA
Excuse me?

ANNIE picks up ZORA's Bible from her chair.

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

ZORA
I wasn't—

ANNIE
—You can pray in the nurse's station, you can pray in church, you can pray 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 praying 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 bring my Bible with me to pass the time—I'd be reading it 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, a 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 been covered once 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, Nelson, 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 know 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, vast, 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 . . . vast 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 you can 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.

Ethereal music. In dim light, NELSON stands before a river. Along the far bank, colors flash and unidentifiable shapes sway rhythmically. NELSON stretches desperately but he cannot reach them. High in the distance, a katsina-like figure seems to beckon. NELSON calls soundlessly to it. The lights and music fade.

NELSON gasps and awakens, clutching the katsina doll. It is morning, and he is home. ANNIE sits beside him in bed, watching anxiously.

NELSON

I'm sorry.

ANNIE

Why?

NELSON

I woke you.

ANNIE

I wasn't sleeping. What did you dream?

I don't remember. NELSON

Okay. ANNIE

I was at the river. NELSON

Okay. ANNIE

Annie . . . NELSON

looking at the doll
I need to see where you found this.

I told you where— ANNIE

—With my eyes. NELSON

He gets up and puts on shoes.

Now? ANNIE

Yes. NELSON

He exits with the doll.

Nelson! ANNIE

She hurries after him.

NELSON re-enters along the river's downstage bank. He pauses every few steps to compare the site to his memories. ANNIE enters in a bathrobe.

Here? NELSON

ANNIE

More or less.

NELSON

Where exactly?

She jumps down and searches the riverbed.

ANNIE

Here. You can see the hole.

NELSON bounds past where she is standing. On the opposite bank, he props up the katsina doll.

ANNIE (Cont'd)

Mystery solved, great, let's eat breakfast.

NELSON

What else did you find?

ANNIE

Nothing.

NELSON

No?

ANNIE

Well . . .

NELSON

Show me. Please.

ANNIE sighs and exits. NELSON examines the doll from different angles, occasionally adjusting its position.

ZORA enters.

ZORA

Good morning, Nelson.

NELSON

You were my nurse.

ZORA

Zora. You left something at the hospital. I wanted to return it. I hope I'm not—

NELSON

—Let's see.

She hands him a folded piece of paper. He unfolds it and exhales, as though relieved.

ZORA

A little more than a year ago, I was on the telephone. I still had a landline—still have, as a matter of fact, it's more reliable, out here anyway . . . Anyway, there was a thunderstorm, but I was on hold, they were getting a supervisor, and suddenly everything stopped and my whole body burned and I was flying. The doctors couldn't believe when I came to, but in between that moment and the lightning, I'd traveled to another place. With perfect gleaming stars and silence and an uncrossable river.

NELSON

And the figure—the beckoning figure?

ZORA

On the opposite shore.

He points to the katsina doll.

NELSON

This? You saw this?

ZORA

The doll?

NELSON

It beckoned to us.

ZORA

I don't—

NELSON

—Yes! Remember?

ZORA

No.

NELSON

No?

ZORA

It was taller, higher . . .

She points to NELSON's paper.

ZORA (Cont'd)

Here, see, you've drawn it higher.

As NELSON struggles with this discrepancy, ANNIE re-enters, carrying the bone and wire.

ANNIE

I found this bone the day you collapsed.

fingering the wire

And this, well . . . I don't know what I was thinking, but—

seeing ZORA

Zora?

ZORA

Annie, I was just—

NELSON

—HA!

He grabs the bone and plants it in the riverbank. He then uses the wire to fasten the doll atop the bone.

ZORA

How are you both doing?

ANNIE

We're . . . um—

NELSON

—You see now?

ANNIE

to ZORA

What's he talking about?

NELSON

It's taller! See?

ANNIE

Zora?

ZORA walks slowly around the bone and doll. Finally she looks at NELSON and smiles.

ZORA

Yes.

Blackout.

II

Lights up to reveal NELSON waiting patiently beside the river; the doll remains fastened to the bone on the opposite bank. Downstage, ANNIE reads and takes notes from a variety of texts. ZORA faces the audience.

ZORA

I did see a figure, more like a person, though I wouldn't describe it as "beckoning." More like yearning—the physical expression of yearning, I mean. But that didn't interest me, whatever it was—is—like the lights. Each an unearthly color, high above the trees. What seemed like trees—I don't know much about trees—if trees on earth could grow forever. Like a coloring book without lines. And above these . . . pulsing lights. When you're listening to music and running, you know how at first your steps keep perfect time, without even trying—one step per beat—but it's an illusion, in fact, because after twenty or thirty steps, you're slightly off, and then you're slightly further off. These lights, as they pulsed, they hadn't yet passed the phase of only slightly off, but you could tell. A rhythm had been established—ages and ages ago—and gradually, gradually, gradually lost. I think had I stayed there forever I'd go crazy.

High above these colors are stars. These don't pulse—their light is steady and impossibly bright, but they don't hurt to look at. I think there is only one star, everywhere and in no particular place at once. Anyway, I was drawn to one star. I understood—in my mind's eye I saw—how the lights are from the star to keep time, order, in the world. And they are failing. No. The world is failing to keep up. And each of us bears responsibility. And each of us must work to close the distance. And that is why I came back.

ZORA sits beside NELSON.

NELSON

Hi there.

ZORA

Annie says you're out here every day.

NELSON

I like it here.

ZORA

Who needs purpose when you can stare all day at muck and bone. Nelson, bone! Have you even called the police?

NELSON
What for?

ZORA
That's someone's bone!

NELSON
That's a cow's bone.

ZORA
Cow's?

NELSON
Of course. Look how thick it is.

ZORA
But—

NELSON
—Either some cow died upriver, or someone chopped down a beanstalk.

ZORA
It's creepy regardless.

NELSON
It's part of the key.

ZORA
Key to what?

NELSON
There's a river in the afterworld, right?

ZORA
Yes . . .

NELSON
There's a river here.

ZORA
This is a very different river.

NELSON
There's a figure in the afterworld, right?

ZORA

Nelson, stop calling it the afterworld.

NELSON

That's what it is.

ZORA

No! There we are closer to God.

NELSON

God?

ZORA

This world here is nothing in comparison. It's the pre-world.

NELSON

What does this have to do with God?

ZORA

Are you joking?

He shakes his head.

ZORA (Cont'd)

Nelson, the soul survives the body's death so that God may judge it.

NELSON

I survived my body's death, but nothing judged me.

ZORA

You're not making sense.

NELSON

You're not making sense. What soul?

ZORA

You died, you still existed, you have a soul.

NELSON

And God?

ZORA

God made you! God made your soul!

NELSON

So you believe.

ZORA

Stop. What do you think happened to us?

NELSON

That's what I'm here to learn. So far the river has given us two clues. Each clue will get us closer to the other side.

ZORA

Watch me, Nelson—other side . . .

She steps across the river to the opposite bank.

It looks very much like your side. Almost exactly, in fact. Can you guess why?

NELSON

Why are you angry?

ZORA

Because it's just a river! If God wants us to cross a river, He will show us the way in His time. Meantime, each day is an opportunity to fulfill His purpose for us. And God doesn't purpose for us to sit idly by a river!

NELSON

If God wants me to fulfill some purpose, he'd do better telling me himself.

ZORA

What do you think He was doing when you died?

NELSON

You know?

ZORA

Nelson, of course I don't know. But I'll tell you what I believe.

NELSON

What do you believe?

ZORA

I believe the reason you can't cross the river is because you're weighted with doubt. And stubborn pride. Only by accepting God through Jesus Christ will you be free. You'll look to cross, and you'll already be there.

NELSON

Supposing that's true—

ZORA

—It is!

NELSON

All right.

ZORA

All right?

NELSON

So why couldn't you cross when you were there?

ZORA

Who said I was trying to?

She returns to NELSON's side and sits beside him.

NELSON

Shouldn't you be at work?

ZORA

Yes.

standing

But I'm coming back.

She exits. NELSON resumes staring at the river.

ANNIE stands.

ANNIE

Nelson?

NELSON

I'm here.

ANNIE

You should read this. It's about near-death experiences.

She takes him a book.

NELSON

What's it say?

ANNIE

That lots of people have them. Some are similar in some ways to yours.

NELSON

Like Zora.

ANNIE

What?

NELSON

Zora said—

ANNIE

—And others are different. Just listen. Different causes, different perceptions, different effects on the survivor.

NELSON

Effects?

ANNIE

Lots of people find themselves more spiritually inclined, after. I understand—I wonder just like you what happens when we die.

NELSON

There's nothing to fear.

ANNIE

I'm glad you believe that. I am. But Nelson, believing that you died and left your body is not proof you really did. There are so many ways the brain can trick itself—that's one of the chapters in this book. Doctors can put an electrode in someone's brain—in the tempura region, tempura-something—and when they turn on the electricity the person's consciousness leaves her body. You see? She senses herself floating above her body, six feet in the air, until they turn off the current and instantly she comes down. And this happens with the flip of a switch. Every time.

NELSON

But I didn't just float above my body. I was in another world.

ANNIE

You've never had a vivid dream before?

NELSON

Never this vivid.

ANNIE

You'd never had a heart attack before either. Maybe when the body is so close to death, it becomes hypersensitive. Like if every sensation might be the last, you pay extra attention.

NELSON

Maybe . . .

ANNIE

Just read this.

NELSON

But the connections we keep finding—

ANNIE

—What connections?

NELSON

The river gives you a bone—

ANNIE

—I found a bone.

NELSON

The very moment I drop dead, you find a bone. And the moment I come back, you find a protective spirit—

ANNIE

—Coincidences, Nelson! They're coincidences!

NELSON

Those are incredible coincidences.

ANNIE

That doesn't make them proof of resurrection! How many people do you think die every day?

NELSON

Must be millions.

ANNIE

Over one-hundred-and-fifty million. Times three-hundred-and-sixty-five. Times two-hundred-thousand years of human existence. In the entire history of the species, Nelson, what do you think the odds are that someone, somewhere, has died at the exact moment his wife found a bone in a river? Or come out of a coma thirty days later? Or had any conceivable experience that a person might have while his brain is suffocating?

NELSON

Why can't you conceive of the possibility that this world is not the end?

ANNIE

Because you're not that special! Where were the other hundred-and-fifty-million souls along that river? Or is the afterlife only for you? And Zora?

NELSON

That's what I'm trying to find out!

ANNIE

THEN READ THIS!

She thrusts the book at him and exits. NELSON starts to flip through it, but soon he sets it aside and stands facing the doll. He makes focused, reaching gestures, as though to will himself across the river.

ZORA enters. She watches NELSON, and something clicks in her memory. She stands in front of the bone, opposite NELSON, who stops gesturing.

ZORA

Don't stop! Please.

Slowly, NELSON repeats the gestures.

ZORA (Cont'd)

Oh Lord . . .

NELSON

Can I stop?

ZORA

You . . .

NELSON stops. ZORA begins to gesture, as though praying, toward the sky.

ZORA (Cont'd)

Like this, yes?

NELSON

I . . . you . . . ?

ZORA

Us! Nelson!

She stops gesturing.

We saw each other!

NELSON

I reached out, you beckoned—

ZORA

—To God. We supplicated.

NELSON

I reached out to you.

ZORA

Look up!

He does.

ZORA (Cont'd)

Not now! Not literally.

NELSON

But I didn't see God, I saw—

ZORA

—How can you say you don't see God when you don't look for Him? Nelson, He brought us together for a purpose.

NELSON

I just want to cross the river, Zora.

ZORA

You'll cross when you have faith.

NELSON

Why do you care who has faith?

ZORA

God cares.

NELSON

I need more proof.

ZORA

What proof told you to stick a good-luck charm on a cow's bone?

She moves to pull up the bone. He stops her.

NELSON

Wait!

ZORA

Nelson, this is foolishness—

NELSON

—Please! I'll think about it. I promise. But I need this here. For now.

ZORA

For now . . .

NELSON

Thank you.

ZORA

Why is it so difficult?

NELSON

You don't just choose to believe something.

ZORA

What else do you do?

NELSON

I don't.

ANNIE re-enters with another book.

ANNIE

Nelson!

NELSON

to ZORA

We don't.

ANNIE

to ZORA

You're here again. Why?

ZORA

I'll go.

NELSON

Annie, we're connected somehow.

ANNIE

How?

NELSON

She died and came back from the same world, just like me.

ANNIE
Did she?

ZORA
Yes.

ANNIE
And I suppose you have your own bone and katsy doll?

ZORA
No.

NELSON
Annie—

ZORA
—That isn't our connection.

ANNIE
No. Your connection is you nearly died. Like this man ...
reading from the book

“I felt my body fall away until the only thing left was a tiny pinpoint of consciousness. Across the void was another pinpoint of light that grew bigger and bigger until I realized it was pulling me to it at a fantastic speed. Suddenly I was inside it, hurtling through brighter and brighter layers, and somehow knowing that when I reached the center I'd be annihilated.”

turning to another page
Or her ...

reading
“I heard something calling my name, and I stepped out of bed. The voice was farther now, and as I walked the walls dissolved around me into fog, and there were new voices, like a conversation that I could almost make sense of, but every time I asked where we were going, they laughed, until finally I refused to go any farther. That's when they attacked, from every side, I felt kicking and scratching and biting and tearing my flesh.”

ANNIE closes the book.

ZORA
Go on.

ANNIE
More?

ZORA
I know her testimony. It doesn't end with demons.

ANNIE

It ends like every near-death experience. She lives.

ZORA

She recites the Lord's Prayer, and they stop tormenting her.

ANNIE

And when she wakes back up in the hospital, Nelson, and she goes back to her life, she doesn't spend it trying to relive her experience.

ZORA

She urges others to embrace Christ, that they be spared her experience.

ANNIE

Not every story has to involve Jesus!

NELSON

It sounds like this one does.

ANNIE

Nelson, you're obsessed with a place that exists in your head. Count your blessings and be glad there were no demons. And come home.

NELSON

If it's only in my head, what was she doing there?

ANNIE

Who?

NELSON

Zora, tell her.

ZORA

We were on opposite sides of the river. We saw each other.

ANNIE

When?

NELSON

When we died.

ANNIE

When you died . . . how many months apart?

ZORA

One year.

NELSON
In Earth time.

ANNIE
Earth time . . .
 to ZORA
You believe this?

ZORA
I believe God's time is not ours.

ANNIE
I suppose that's why we're all still waiting for him.

ZORA
That's right.

ANNIE
No, it's convenient.

NELSON
Annie—

ANNIE
—Nelson, you have a choice to make. Do you want to live on Earth, with me, or in a dream.

NELSON
 to ZORA
You should go.

ZORA
Yes.

ZORA exits. NELSON stares at the river.

ANNIE
Thank you.

NELSON
There used to be so much water.

ANNIE
There may be again.

NELSON

turning away
I'm going for a walk.

ANNIE

All right. Would you like some—

NELSON

—By myself.

He exits.

ANNIE sits. Exasperated, she tosses the book into the river. After a moment she sighs and steps down to retrieve it. As she does, she notices something else in the muck, bends, and digs out an old pocket watch. She stands debating what to do. Blackout.

When lights return, it is night. ANNIE and NELSON are beside each other in bed. He is reading the Bible. She is trying to read as well, but she keeps glancing at him, as though fearing some change. Finally, he closes the Bible.

NELSON

I hate this.

ANNIE

What?

NELSON

This book! It isn't inspiring or enlightening or even well written—well, okay, some parts are, sometimes, and there's more to go. I mean, pages and pages of the same thing, except when it says the opposite, and it's repetitive and confusing and unrelatable to me and, and, and . . . it's just boring, Annie.

ANNIE

So you're done?

NELSON

I don't know.

ANNIE

Why are you reading it?

NELSON

It seems like something I should read. It's an important book.

ANNIE

Like *War and Peace*?

NELSON

Maybe. But more so.

ANNIE

You didn't finish *War and Peace*.

NELSON

You didn't either.

ANNIE

And you don't see me reading the Bible.

NELSON

It's a really good beginning.

ANNIE

It's the beginning.

NELSON

Let there be light! But see, right there—God didn't create the Sun and stars until the fourth day. So what is he making on the first?

ANNIE

Light bulbs.

NELSON

Not in this translation.

ANNIE

You should try the original.

NELSON

Right, okay—so according to the introduction, the authoritative Hebrew Bible was compiled from a variety of older texts, and this was done centuries after the Greek and Latin translations, which were themselves made from a variety of older texts, and even different copies of the same text have variants due to copyist errors!

ANNIE

Sounds reasonable.

NELSON

So how can any of it claim to be the word of God?

ANNIE

Baby, you should probably have this conversation with someone who believes that's what it is.

NELSON

But Zora isn't texting back.

ANNIE

Oh.

NELSON

I'm teasing.

She kisses him, and they return to reading. New light reveals ZORA, praying.

ZORA

Lord, you know that on my walk to work, a little before the high school, there's a butcher. His name is Christopher—I only learned his name today, though he's been there for years, he said. He was out front this morning, changing the specials board, and it occurred to me to ask Christopher—I'd never talked to him before, but I thought to ask if he had any bones I could have. To give Paulie. He said he'd set aside some for me to pick up on my way home. And I didn't think of it again till lunch when I opened my Bible, and it fell open to the book of Proverbs, chapter 17, and I read verse 22: "A joyful heart does good medicine, but a broken spirit dries up the bones." Which got me thinking on Ezekiel . . .

In bed, ANNIE turns to NELSON.

ANNIE

You know, light doesn't come only from stars.

NELSON

Mm hmm.

ANNIE

God could have created light first and then the Sun.

NELSON

I guess . . .

ANNIE

Why not?

NELSON

Well, light comes from something, right? It has a source.

ANNIE

It's energy. In the beginning, God made energy.

NELSON

Not exactly. In the beginning, God made heaven and Earth.

ANNIE

Presumably using energy.

NELSON

But light doesn't come first first.

ANNIE

Light is just one form of energy. So you have all this energy, and it wants to have an effect on something, so God creates something—everything—heaven, Earth, the whole shebang. And these things have mass, which is space, and they have motion, which is time, and you shake it all together over billions of years, and you have us.

NELSON

You've figured out the Bible.

ANNIE

And I never even read it.

NELSON

But Annie, what you described—light and time and the entire universe—doesn't it sound like some of what you were reading from that book? Like the guy who was going to be annihilated by the brightness, or even what Zora and I experienced?

ANNIE

What you initially described has changed since you met Zora.

NELSON

She noticed certain things, I noticed others.

ANNIE

Or maybe her story has changed since she met you.

NELSON

I've been thinking about how we could have seen each other. It involves the brain. You want to hear?

ANNIE

Okay.

She puts down her book.

NELSON

Okay, how do I know you said “Okay” first and then put down your book?

ANNIE

I don’t know . . . ?

NELSON

Well, my ears hear a sound, and it travels to my brain, and my eyes see a sight, and it travels to my brain, and my brain does its thing, so I’m aware that the sound is your voice and the sight is you putting down the book. And I count on my brain to make me aware of things in the order I sense them, right? I mean, for the mental reality to reflect the physical reality. But what if it doesn’t? What if in physical fact I see the sight first and then hear the sound, but my brain makes me aware of the sound first? My experience of time would reverse.

ANNIE

Why would your brain do that?

NELSON

I don’t know. It doesn’t matter why, only that it might. Or you know how time slows when you’re dying?

ANNIE

No.

NELSON

Well, maybe that’s from your body taking in so much, so many sights and smells and everything there is to experience, because never again, right? But your brain still has to process everything the same. Like a movie camera that captures twice as many frames—what happens when you play it back? It slows. And the reverse—when you’re just going about your day and you’re not paying attention to much of anything, and before you know it the day’s gone?

ANNIE

Nelson, what does this have to do with you and Zora?

NELSON

Time is about how the brain processes your experiences. So what if when we’re in that world—

ANNIE

—You and Zora?

NELSON

When we’re in that world, we’re existing in God’s brain, and it’s fitting together pieces from all different times and places in the universe?

ANNIE

God's brain?

NELSON

Brain, mind, whatever.

ANNIE

Nelson, do you believe in God now?

NELSON

I just . . . I want to understand what happened to me.

ANNIE

I know.

NELSON

No, you think you already understand. But Annie, you weren't there.

ANNIE

What do you want me to say?

NELSON

I just thought by now I'd know more.

ANNIE

It's been a month.

NELSON

I thought by now there'd be another clue.

Each thinks in silence. ZORA turns in her Bible to Ezekiel and reads.

ZORA

“The hand of the Lord was upon me, and set me down in the midst of the valley, which was full of bones. And He said to me, *Son of man, can these bones live?* Again He said to me, *Prophesy upon these bones, and say to them, ‘O you dry bones, hear the word of the Lord: Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you, and you shall live; and I will lay sinews upon you, and will bring up flesh upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord.’* So I prophesied as I was commanded: and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and a shaking, and the bones came together, bone to his bone.”

As ZORA reads to herself, ANNIE shows NELSON the pocket watch.

ANNIE

I found this in the river.

NELSON

When?

She doesn't reply.

NELSON (Cont'd)

When?

ANNIE

A few weeks ago.

NELSON

I don't recognize this.

ANNIE

Right, of course not—it's just an old watch. It's junk from upriver. Probably been rusting for years.

He opens the watch and reads the time.

NELSON

Twelve twenty-one . . .
to ANNIE
AM or PM?

ANNIE

It doesn't work anymore.

NELSON

It's cool. It's cool junk.
taking her hand
That's progress, right?

She kisses him. He responds. As they kiss, ZORA dials a number on her phone. Beside the bed, NELSON's phone rings. He breaks away from ANNIE to answer.

NELSON (Cont'd)

Hello?

ZORA

Nelson, I'd like you to come with me to church.

NELSON

Church?

ZORA

On Sunday. Annie too, if she likes.

NELSON

to ANNIE

Zora's invited us to church.

ANNIE makes a face.

ZORA

Hello?

NELSON

to ZORA

No, Sunday isn't good.

ZORA

Then the following Sunday. Ten-ten.

NELSON

Ten-ten . . .

As ZORA continues talking, NELSON studies the watch.

ZORA

That's right. Now there are two different services. I prefer the early worship, but if nine AM is too early for you, there's another worship at eleven. We could go after for brunch—I know the perfect spot, right beside the—

ANNIE

What does she want?

What?

Nelson?

NELSON

—Zora, does December twenty-first mean something to you?

ZORA

What?

ANNIE

What?

NELSON

December twenty-first. Twelve twenty-one. When's Christmas?

ZORA

Christmas is December twenty-fifth.

ANNIE

Who cares?

NELSON

Zora, think, the twenty-first, it must mean something—

ANNIE

—NO!

ANNIE shuts off the phone and forces NELSON to look at her.

ANNIE (Cont'd)

Baby, please, you said it yourself, it's junk.

NELSON

It's the first day of winter, right? The twenty-first?

ANNIE

Yes, and July was your coma, and I was born in September, and we got married on a Tuesday because we couldn't wait. Now breathe.

They breathe together for a moment.

ANNIE (Cont'd)

Now tell me, Nelson, why you can't let this go.

NELSON

I'm scared of dying.

ANNIE

You said it wasn't painful.

NELSON

Not that it's painful. That I'll be stuck. That I've been singled out to pass this test, and if I fail, I won't get into heaven.

ANNIE

Why would you be singled out?

NELSON

Like Zora says—

ANNIE

—If Zora is who you have to be to get into heaven, she can have it.

NELSON
What about you?

ANNIE
What about me?

NELSON
I want to spend heaven with you.

ANNIE
Nelson, I will never believe, if there's a god, and it's wasting its time on heaven when we have real problems on Earth—I will never believe in that god.

NELSON
He might send you to hell.

ANNIE
Then you're welcome to join me there.

NELSON
You're being stubborn.

ANNIE
You're being childish.

NELSON
Annie, as far as I could see along that shore, on my side, was empty. And on the opposite shore was something wonderful. To know it's there, to know you'll never be part of it—maybe that's what it means to reject God.

ANNIE
Do you love me?

NELSON
Of course.

ANNIE
What did you do—when you knew you loved me?

NELSON
I married you.

ANNIE
No.

Yes! NELSON

You asked me to marry you. ANNIE

And you said yes. NELSON

What if I'd said no? ANNIE

Why? NELSON

What if I didn't love you? ANNIE

Are you telling me you don't— NELSON

—Jesus, Nelson, it's a hypothetical! I love you. Answer the question. ANNIE

If you didn't marry me . . . ? NELSON

If I said no. ANNIE

I guess . . . I'd be sad? NELSON

Forever? ANNIE

I hope not. NELSON

You'd move on? ANNIE

Yes. NELSON

ANNIE

You wouldn't banish me to the dead side of a river, cut me off from love, from other people?

NELSON

I don't have that power.

ANNIE

You'd use it if you did?

NELSON

I might be tempted.

ANNIE

And what does God say about temptation?

NELSON

What?

ANNIE

Well, God's against it, right?

NELSON

Probably. I don't know. Not sure I've got that far.

ANNIE

God's against it. "Lead us not into temptation."

NELSON

I think this is why I should go to church.

ANNIE

Why?

NELSON

Because you don't really know what you're talking about. I don't either.

ANNIE

Nobody knows what they're talking about! Not about God.

NELSON

Right, but they know different things. Than you. I'd like to hear what they say.

ANNIE

I'm not going to church.

NELSON
You don't have to.

ANNIE
For how long?

NELSON
At least once. And afterward we'll have brunch.

ANNIE
Brunch?

NELSON
You love brunch.

ANNIE
Nelson—

NELSON
—I'm just looking for answers.

ANNIE
I know. I know.

He kisses her. She goes back to reading. Blackout.

When lights return, it is day. ANNIE, NELSON, and ZORA are picnicking beside the river. For an awkward moment, everyone eats silently.

ANNIE
a new thought
Also I'd hate to miss football.

ZORA
Oh.

ANNIE
It's a very big part of my Sunday.

ZORA
You're missing it now, aren't you?

NELSON
She doesn't watch football.

ZORA
What?

NELSON
It's too violent.

ZORA
Oh . . .

ANNIE shrugs.

ZORA (Cont'd)
So it's not a real excuse.

ANNIE
No. My real excuse is I don't believe in God.

ZORA
That didn't stop Nelson.

NELSON
I believe in community.

ANNIE snorts.

NELSON (Cont'd)
Don't you?

ANNIE
If we had corn I'd throw it at you.

ZORA
Next Sunday I'll bring some.

ANNIE
Are we making this a habit?

ZORA
I'm having fun.

ANNIE
Everything is delicious. Thank you.

ZORA
You're very welcome. I accept donations.

ANNIE

What?

ZORA and NELSON laugh.

NELSON

I think I have a ten on me.

ZORA

I'm sure you do.

ANNIE

I feel like such an outsider.

ZORA

Your husband, this morning when they took up the offering, dutifully opened his wallet and placed a twenty-dollar bill in the collection plate.

ANNIE

Nelson, twenty dollars?

ZORA

He then proceeded to remove a ten-dollar bill from the collection plate and place it in his wallet.

NELSON

All I had was a twenty.

ZORA

I was so mortified.

NELSON

No one said anything.

ANNIE

Why should they?

ZORA

I don't want people to think he's stealing.

ANNIE

Stealing? You got ten dollars out of him.

ZORA

We know that.

ANNIE

And everyone else can go jump in a lake.

NELSON

Next time I'll give the whole twenty.

ANNIE

Don't be ridiculous.

ZORA

You can always make change beforehand. Or after the service.

ANNIE

Or maybe just being there is enough.

NELSON

It's so complicated!

ZORA

Just give what you're moved to give.

ANNIE

That's what he did!

ZORA

I'm sorry I said anything.

taking his hand

I'm sorry.

NELSON pulls away. He walks restlessly along the riverbank. He sees the bone and doll.

NELSON

I'll admit, that's kind of creepy.

ANNIE

It keeps away the crows.

ZORA

And the cows.

NELSON unfastens the doll, pulls the bone out of the ground, and hurls it away.

NELSON

still holding the doll

What about this?

ZORA

I'll take it.

ANNIE

Are you part Hopi?

ZORA

My mentor collected them. At the hospital. She wasn't Hopi either, but she grew up in Winslow, and one year she invited me back to the Standin' on the Corner Festival.

NELSON gives ZORA the doll.

ZORA (Cont'd)

Oh! The most extraordinary thing happened Thursday. We'd admitted a man for chest pains, and he arrested but he was resuscitated right away, and afterward he asked why there was an earring on the roof. And it turned out that before he was resuscitated he'd left his body, and he could see the doctors working on him below—and he knew, for example, that Dr. Cortez had a bald spot—don't tell him I told you. And then he went further out—he was looking down on the hospital itself—and he saw this earring. Right in the middle of the roof, nowhere near a window or a ledge. And we asked a janitor to go up and see, and exactly where the man had described was the earring! Now how do you explain that?

NELSON

Coincidence?

ZORA

Exactly where he'd said.

ANNIE

What does that mean, "exactly"? Did he give coordinates?

ZORA

He said above his room, right in the middle of the roof.

ANNIE

You were there when he said this?

ZORA

Yes.

ANNIE thinks.

NELSON

So what was it doing there? The earring?

ZORA

Oh, it belonged to a maintenance worker. She'd been up the day before, checking something, and I guess it fell off.

ANNIE

And she works at the hospital?

ZORA

Yes.

ANNIE

So she was probably asking people about it. If they'd seen it.

ZORA

She didn't ask the patients!

ANNIE

No. But he might have overheard her, or someone else talking, and then he imagined—

ZORA

—That's quite a reach.

ANNIE

It's less of a reach than what you want to believe. That his soul took a break on the way to heaven to scope out a roof.

ZORA

It's only a reach if you don't believe in the soul.

ANNIE

One incredible story—out of the hundreds of people you see every day—proves only that most people don't leave their bodies and see earrings on the roof.

ZORA

Maybe people like you make them embarrassed to talk about it.

ANNIE

This country is three-quarters Christian!

NELSON

Zora, what are you going to do with the doll?

ZORA

Let me say one more thing. There are people at my church—at every church, I'm sure—and they'll tell you God answers every prayer, only sometimes He says no. Something about that always bothered me, but I didn't know exactly what till nursing school. Then as now I prayed for my patients—some lived and others died, but that wasn't what bothered me, because God has a plan for each of us, and I wasn't foolish enough to think I was the deciding vote in anyone's plan. God doesn't have to answer to me. Really I was praying for myself, to make myself feel better, and that's fine. But there were these identical baby twins, born prematurely, twenty-two weeks, which nearly always means, well, dead. But the parents prayed and prayed, and I prayed too, but after two weeks the first baby died, and then the second baby's heart stopped. And then it started up again, and it kept on beating, week by week kept beating. And the baby lived. She lived. And I was shattered, because for either baby to live was a miracle—because we all prayed for two miracles, and God's answer was *I'll give you one*? It made no sense.

ANNIE

It makes sense now?

ZORA

God didn't save either baby, that's what I decided. He made them, He put them in the world, and He lets life happen. No one is special, no one is singled out.

ANNIE

But—

ZORA

—Then last year when I died, everything I experienced said I was wrong. This world has purpose, deep purpose, from God. He opened my eyes. He opened Nelson's. Partway.

ANNIE

What about the babies?

ZORA

I don't know.

ANNIE

You're back where you started.

ZORA

Now I have faith.

ANNIE

What a magic word.

NELSON spots something in the riverbed. He jumps down and picks it out of the muck.

ANNIE (Cont'd)
What is it? Babe?

NELSON
A ring.

ANNIE
Ooh.

NELSON
It's familiar . . .

ANNIE
Let's see!

He brings ANNIE the ring and she puts it on. It fits perfectly.

NELSON
It's your engagement ring.

ANNIE
What?

NELSON
The ring I lost in the river.

ANNIE
No . . .

NELSON
It is! It fits!

ANNIE
Nelson, let's be realistic—

NELSON
—I'll prove it. Give it back.

She does. He drops to one knee.

NELSON (Cont'd)
Annie, will you marry me again?

ANNIE
You're serious?

NELSON
Heart and soul.

He puts the ring back on her finger.

ANNIE
I love you.

They kiss.

ZORA
May I see, please?

ANNIE shows her the ring.

ZORA (Cont'd)
All this time it was under your noses.

NELSON
And water.

ZORA
And in remarkably good shape.

ANNIE
It must have been buried deep.

ZORA
It's lovely.

ZORA looks down at the riverbed. ANNIE takes NELSON's hand.

ANNIE
Baby, what did you have in mind?

NELSON
We'll throw a party. The biggest that's ever been thrown here. We'll invite everyone, even people we don't know, and we'll make it all about second chances.

ANNIE
Sounds perfect!

NELSON

At life, at love, at everything!

ZORA

Whose footprints are those?

ANNIE

What?

ZORA

Where he dug up the ring. There's Nelson's, fresh, and then beside him is a smaller set.

ANNIE

We've all been walking in there.

ZORA

I haven't. Not today.

ZORA lifts her feet to show that her shoes are clean.

NELSON

What are you saying?

ZORA

You really don't know?

NELSON

What?

ANNIE

Nelson, come with me inside.

ZORA

I'm saying there are two possibilities. Either that ring has been sitting there for years, waiting for you to spot it, or else someone put it there more recently.

NELSON

How recently?

ZORA

How 'bout this morning? We were at church.

to ANNIE

Where were you?

ANNIE
Get out.

ZORA
Let's see your shoes.

ANNIE
Nelson, tell her to go.

NELSON
to ZORA
Why would you even think this?

ZORA
You're not at all curious?

ANNIE
Nelson, tell me about the party. We should barbecue, right—when was the last time we barbecued—and you can make a new drink. With a stupid pun involving our names.

NELSON
Annie—

ANNIE
—Nelson, I don't care about a ring. When have I ever cared about a ring? But I will marry you again and again and again, every day. Every day. All you have to do is ask.

NELSON
Annie . . .

ANNIE
What?

NELSON
Please show me your shoes.

ANNIE
“Please”?

He nods.

ANNIE (Cont'd)
No.

NELSON
Why not?

ANNIE
Because I'm your wife.

NELSON
So you can lie with impunity?

ANNIE
I've told you everything!

NELSON
Are those your footprints?

ANNIE
FUCK YOU!

He turns to leave.

ANNIE (Cont'd)
Nelson, wait—

He exits. ZORA follows. ANNIE collapses, defeated.

Away from the river, NELSON re-enters. ZORA catches up.

ZORA
Nelson! It's for the best.

NELSON
She's lying.

ZORA
She's a distraction.

NELSON
My wife.

ZORA
“He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me. He who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.”

NELSON
That isn't love.

ZORA

It's perfect love. For the eternal, the unchanging, who loves you perfectly. Who asks only your love in return.

She takes his hand. He kisses her. She slaps him.

ZORA (Cont'd)

Idiot! You weren't even listening.

NELSON

I—

ZORA

—What we want doesn't matter, Nelson, not in this life. All that matters is what God wants for us.

NELSON

What do I do?

ZORA

Learn to ask God.

NELSON

I don't know how.

ZORA

I'll help you.

She holds out her hand again. He takes it, and they exit together.

Beside the river, ANNIE takes off the ring and reburies it in the riverbed where NELSON found it. She picks up the katsina doll, which ZORA has left behind, and buries it as well.

As ANNIE digs, she uncovers a bottle that contains a large piece of paper. She opens the bottle, extracts and unfolds the paper, and stares at what she sees. Blackout.

III

At lights, the paper that ANNIE discovered is displayed. Drawn in vibrant colors by a skilled, if untrained, hand, it shows a river cutting through a fertile plain.

NELSON faces the audience. Behind him, ANNIE looks at the drawing.

NELSON

This morning I felt lightheaded—I thought I might faint—so I went back to the hospital. I'm fine. In the waiting room next to me was an old man. We got to talking, and it turns out he used to live here. Not this house, I mean—it was just an empty field—but across the river, where there's now an empty field, was a little shack he'd built himself. And he was an artist. Then like now the rain stopped, less each year, until finally he had a dream. About how to fix things. He drew the land as it used to be, or how he wanted it—green fields and high water—and he slipped the drawing in a bottle, and he sealed the bottle and buried it together with a doll he'd once traded a sketch for. In the dust of the river he buried them. He fell asleep, and the next day it rained. It rained, and the land recovered.

ANNIE

And then it stopped.

NELSON

Stopped.

ANNIE

And the river turned back to dust.

NELSON studies the drawing.

NELSON

You found this . . . ?

ANNIE

Yesterday.

NELSON

You find everything, have you noticed?

ANNIE

Nelson—

NELSON

—The doll, the watch. Every time I turn around, you dig up something.

ANNIE

Not quite.

NELSON

Right. I found a ring. Where is it?

ANNIE

You want it now?

NELSON

It doesn't matter. I don't need a ring to show I love you.

ANNIE

Good.

NELSON

I just need you to be honest.

She only stares.

NELSON (Cont'd)

What else did you put out there? The watch? The bone? I need to know—

ANNIE

—No, you don't want me to be honest, Nelson, because if I were honest I might say I wish sometimes you were still unconscious, because then at least the only thing I'd have of you are memories I still recognize.

NELSON

I'm sorry.

ANNIE

For what?

NELSON

Not being what you remember.

ANNIE

I didn't say . . .

NELSON

It doesn't matter.

ANNIE

So you met an old man . . .

NELSON

He was ancient old.

ANNIE

You should give him back his drawing.

NELSON

What's he going to do with it?

ANNIE

What are you? Nelson?

NELSON

I think we should keep it.

ANNIE

I don't want it.

NELSON

I'm keeping it.

She starts to leave.

NELSON (Cont'd)

Where are you going?

ANNIE

Away.

NELSON

For how long?

ANNIE

I don't know.

NELSON

I need you. Annie—

ANNIE

—Make do.

NELSON

December twenty-first—twelve twenty-one—that's when it started raining.

ANNIE

What?

He takes out the pocket watch.

NELSON

You see? The old man told me—

ANNIE

—Is that his watch?

NELSON

He didn't recognize it. But Annie, he buried this drawing in the river on December twentieth, and the next day—twelve twenty-one—it started raining.

ANNIE

So what?

NELSON

So! That's when it's going to rain again. Here. Twelve twenty-one.

ANNIE tears the drawing in half and lets the pieces fall.

NELSON (Cont'd)

You had no right.

ANNIE

I found it.

Again she tries to leave.

NELSON

Why did you file a complaint against Zora?

ANNIE

I filed an anonymous complaint.

NELSON

I guessed.

ANNIE

She's behaved inappropriately.

NELSON

It was me.

ANNIE

What was you?

NELSON

I kissed her, she slapped me.

She pushes past him.

NELSON (Cont'd)

I'm sorry—

ANNIE

—Do what you want. December twenty-first, December thirty-first, I don't care. Leave me out of it.

She exits.

NELSON slides together the drawing's pieces, like a puzzle on the ground, then sets the watch on top. He kneels, folds his hands, and closes his eyes.

NELSON

God . . . what do I do?

He waits, then changes his posture.

God . . . what do I do?

He waits, then changes his posture.

God . . . what do I do?

He stands, paces, and stops.

Make another!

He takes a pad of paper and a pencil to the river and tries to draw what he sees, but soon gives up.

NELSON (Cont'd)

This isn't what you want, it isn't me. So think!
to heaven

You want a cocktail?

shrugging

I make a good cocktail. Think!

shivering

I think better when I'm comfortable.

He returns home and grabs the blanket and pillows from the bed, plus a bottle of whiskey. He places everything on a chair, then turns the other chair upside-down and sets it atop the first chair.

NELSON (Cont'd)

She'll want to be comfortable too. When she returns.

He carries the chairs to the river and sets up camp. He sits, wraps himself in the blanket, and takes a drink.

NELSON (Cont'd)

Unless comfortable is the problem . . .

He dumps his chair, pillow, and blanket in the river, then tosses in the other chair and pillow. The stage is clear of furniture.

She can sit with me on Mother Earth.

He sits and notices the bottle of whiskey.

Whoops!

He pours out the whiskey, then lies back and closes his eyes. Time passes.

ZORA enters. She spots NELSON on the ground.

ZORA

Nelson?

She hurries to his side and checks his pulse. NELSON gasps and awakens.

ZORA (Cont'd)

Oh thank God.

NELSON

Hi.

ZORA

Nelson, I've been calling you.

NELSON

But I didn't bring a phone.

ZORA

For days!

NELSON

What's wrong?

ZORA

You didn't come to church.

I did!

NELSON

You stopped.

ZORA

It didn't help.

NELSON

It's cold, let's go inside.

ZORA

I'm staying.

NELSON

How long? For what?

ZORA

You won't understand.

NELSON

Why not?

ZORA

You only care about God.

NELSON

He's God!

ZORA

Your god.

NELSON

I don't even know how to respond.

ZORA

NELSON

You wouldn't change my mind regardless. It isn't about mind. It's a feeling. You have it or you don't. One day if I have it, I'll tell you. But I can't waste any more time.

ZORA

Because you're so well occupied out here, your time's so precious?

NELSON

GO!

ZORA

I'm not leaving you alone.

NELSON

It's getting colder.

*Again he lies back and closes his eyes. She watches hopelessly.
Blackout.*

*When lights return, it is dusk. NELSON lies alone by the river. After a
moment, ANNIE enters with a thermos and a blanket.*

ANNIE

Nelson?

He does not respond. She hesitates. Suddenly he sneezes and laughs.

ANNIE (Cont'd)

Shit! Nelson, I thought you were . . .

He continues laughing.

ANNIE (Cont'd)

What? You asshole, what's funny?

NELSON

I was trying to pretend I hadn't heard you.

ANNIE

Asshole! Put this on.

He lets her wrap him in the blanket.

NELSON

Why did you come back?

ANNIE

How long since you ate?

noticing the empty bottle

Are you drunk?

NELSON

No. I dumped it out.

ANNIE

Drink this.

She holds the thermos to his lips.

NELSON

What—

ANNIE

—It's broth.

He drinks, then offers her the thermos.

ANNIE (Cont'd)

Finish.

NELSON

It's good.

drinking

Thank you.

drinking

Why did you come back?

ANNIE

Zora called.

NELSON

She left.

ANNIE

She thinks you've gone crazy.

NELSON

Because I'm not a Christian.

ANNIE

I think you've gone crazy.

NELSON

I'm not, I just need to do this.

ANNIE

What do you need to do?

NELSON

Stay until it rains.

ANNIE

That's crazy.

NELSON

What if it works? It worked before.

ANNIE

Because of some drawing?

She spots the pad of paper.

Is that what you're doing out here? Drawing?

flipping through the pages

Nelson, you can't even draw!

NELSON

I realize that.

ANNIE

Then what?

NELSON

I'm thinking.

ANNIE

Think inside!

He ignores her.

ANNIE (Cont'd)

Nelson . . . Nelson, all this started because of a river. Remember? How does sitting here get you across?

NELSON

You won't believe me.

ANNIE

Please tell me.

NELSON

When it finally rains in this world—there's something I can do, it will rain, and when I get back to the next world, it will rain there, too.

ANNIE

I don't understand.

NELSON

The river will flood, the shores will disappear, and the world will be the river. There will be nothing to cross.

He finishes the broth.

Is there more?

ANNIE
Inside.

NELSON
Will you get it for me please?

ANNIE
Come with me.

NELSON
I can't.

ANNIE
What if it never rains again?

NELSON
It's going to rain on December twenty-first.

ANNIE
WHY?

NELSON
You know why.

He gestures toward the watch. She picks it up and winds it to a new time.

ANNIE
Look, now it's different.

NELSON
Annie. No.

She crosses to the river and flings away the watch. He doesn't move.

ANNIE
Nelson . . .

NELSON
Yes?

ANNIE
Why is our furniture in the river?

NELSON
We'll get more.

She lights a cigarette.

NELSON (Cont'd)

You should quit.

She smokes.

He straightens his back and closes his eyes.

ANNIE

What are you doing?

NELSON

Meditation.

ANNIE

Since when?

NELSON

Since there's nothing else here to do.

She sits beside him and imitates his posture.

ANNIE

Now what?

NELSON

Clear your mind.

ANNIE

How?

NELSON

Stop talking.

ANNIE

Sorry.

NELSON

Put out your cigarette.

She does.

NELSON (Cont'd)

Just breathe.

They breathe together for a moment. She opens her eyes.

ANNIE

Now what?

NELSON

I don't know.

She playfully punches him. He opens his eyes.

NELSON (Cont'd)

Why did you show me the drawing?

ANNIE

What?

NELSON

After you found it, you could have put it back.

ANNIE

Would you believe it didn't occur to me?

NELSON

Because you waited to show me the watch.

ANNIE

I know.

NELSON

You waited weeks.

ANNIE

Fat difference it made.

NELSON

I'm so close to understanding . . .

She touches him gently.

NELSON (Cont'd)

You'll never see it like me. But you can help. You've helped so much already. You're like a magnet. A magnet doesn't have to understand.

ANNIE

Just say what you want to say.

NELSON

There's nothing else you found you're keeping from me?

She stands as though to leave.

NELSON (Cont'd)

I'm sorry. I believe you.

She sits.

NELSON (Cont'd)

Will you look again? In the river?

ANNIE

Look for what?

NELSON

For what's still buried there.

ANNIE

No.

NELSON

There's more—just one more time!

ANNIE

No.

He sobs.

ANNIE (Cont'd)

What? What? You know what's there. Sticks, pebbles, crumbling mud—pick something, make up something—oh Nelson, shhh . . .

She comforts him. At last he calms himself.

NELSON

Please go.

ANNIE

I—

NELSON

—Go.

ANNIE

I'll get you more broth.

She takes the thermos and exits. He grabs the pencil and paper and writes. Overhead, stars begin to appear. He tears out the paper, slips it into the whiskey bottle, and tosses it in the river.

ANNIE re-enters. She carries two thermoses and two sleeping bags.

NELSON

You're staying?

ANNIE

Yes.

He jumps up and kisses her.

ANNIE (Cont'd)

Help me!

NELSON

Right!

Together they unroll the sleeping bags.

NELSON (Cont'd)

I'm sorry about Zora.

ANNIE

It was good of her to call me.

NELSON

I won't see her again.

ANNIE

She's going to Africa.

NELSON

What?

ANNIE

Some sort of mission.

NELSON

Just like that?

ANNIE

I don't know.

She looks at the sky.

I've always wanted to learn the constellations.

NELSON

pointing

That's Phobia, the Great Spider.

ANNIE

Ah.

NELSON

That's Rufio, the Spider-Eating Monkey.

ANNIE

Maybe.

NELSON

As one rises, the other sets.

ANNIE

Where have you been?

NELSON

Here.

She rests her head on his shoulder. He drinks from his thermos.

NELSON (Cont'd)

We should have a dog.

ANNIE

We can get a dog.

NELSON

There's so much empty space here, he would love it.

ANNIE

We'd have some company.

NELSON

I grew up with cats.

ANNIE

I know. You don't like cats.

NELSON

It's nothing personal. Felinal?

ANNIE

Felinist. That's what you are.

NELSON

At Zora's church, everyone brings their dogs.

ANNIE

Sounds awful.

NELSON

Why?

ANNIE

How many are we talking about?

NELSON

There were fifteen dogs. I lost interest during the sermon. Mostly mutts. Zora's was biggest, but he was very well behaved. No pit bulls.

ANNIE

We'll get one dog. How about tomorrow?

NELSON

December twenty-second. I want to come.

He finishes his broth and reaches for her thermos.

ANNIE

There's more inside. When it's gone, we'll order pizza.

Again he reaches for her thermos. She stops him.

NELSON

What's wrong with you?

ANNIE

I'm great. I'm with my husband. I'm in heaven.

She wraps herself in a sleeping bag and drinks from her thermos. The stars begin to fade and the sky lightens.

NELSON

It's pretty here.

He stands.

ANNIE
What's up?

NELSON
Stiff.

He begins to stretch.

ANNIE
Why'd you dump out the whiskey? That was quality.
She grabs the pencil and paper and flips to a new page.
I'll make a list of needs. For later.
writing
New chairs. A star map. Water.

NELSON
Pillows.

ANNIE
writing
New pillows. Vegetables for broth. Granola bars.

NELSON
That's good.

ANNIE
writing
More paper.
to NELSON
Unless we recycle your drawings.

He finishes stretching and sits beside her.

NELSON
They were false starts. I realized, when you joined me here, we're the key.

ANNIE
Oh?

NELSON
The old man—it wasn't anything he drew that mattered. It was the vision, his vision, of a better future. He imagined it, and he made it. I can't do that alone. Us here together, that's my future. Ours.

ANNIE

Us together anywhere. And a dog. Maybe.

NELSON

I was just thinking out loud.

ANNIE

And now . . . ?

NELSON

I'm confident, Annie, we've found our way.

ANNIE

When did we lose it?

He points to the morning star.

NELSON

The Greeks thought the planet Venus was two different stars. At dawn, before the sunrise, they called it Phosphoros, which means "light-bringer." In the Latin Bible, this became Lucifer. Mesoamericans meanwhile identified the circuit of Venus with the death and rebirth of their god Quetzalcoatl.

leaning back

It's like you set out for a place no one's been to, like a pioneer. You have a general sense of how to get there, but you won't know for sure until you arrive. It's not a question of getting lost. It's whether you keep believing you'll get there.

ANNIE

Nelson, what would you do if there were a heaven, and I wasn't in it?

NELSON

Am I in it?

ANNIE

If you want.

NELSON

What's the alternative?

ANNIE

Obliteration.

NELSON

So either way, we're apart.

ANNIE

Yes.

NELSON

I'd rather be in heaven than obliterated.

ANNIE

What would you do there?

NELSON

Un-obliterate you.

ANNIE

You can't do that.

NELSON

It's heaven, I can do what I want.

ANNIE

And what I want?

NELSON

Why don't you want to be with me in heaven?

ANNIE

That isn't what I'm asking.

NELSON

You wouldn't really choose obliteration.

ANNIE

I don't know.

NELSON

You wouldn't.

ANNIE

Boom.

It is day. He meditates. She hums to herself.

ANNIE

There's someone coming.

She waves into the distance.

HELLOOOOOOO!

after a moment

Never mind.

to NELSON

Hey. Wake up please.

NELSON

I'm not sleeping.

ANNIE

What do we do when it rains?

NELSON

I don't know.

ANNIE

Why haven't you thought about it?

NELSON

I've thought about it.

ANNIE

And . . . ?

He thinks.

ANNIE (Cont'd)

We'll plant a garden.

NELSON

I don't know—

ANNIE

—We'll learn.

NELSON

Maybe. Maybe in spring.

ANNIE

All right. Good.

NELSON

I'd like to bathe myself in the flood.

ANNIE

All right.

NELSON
I smell.

ANNIE
It doesn't matter.

NELSON
I'd like to learn to draw.

ANNIE
I think you should learn something completely new.

NELSON
Why?

ANNIE
Because you're unique.

He grunts.

ANNIE (Cont'd)
How did such unique people ever find each other?

He thinks.

ANNIE (Cont'd)
You were just passing through, and you picked a bar out at random, and you went inside, and I was there. Studying. It was late and empty and you bribed the bartender to let you make me a drink. And I said it was the best drink I ever tasted. And you stayed. Remember?

She holds him. The Sun begins to set.

NELSON
Clouds.

ANNIE
Where?

He points.

ANNIE (Cont'd)
A few. What do you see in them?

He thinks.

ANNIE (Cont'd)

I see whales in breach and blood oranges and my complexion when I was fifteen.

NELSON

They're rainclouds.

ANNIE

I'm cold.

She stands and paces.

We need a guest list for our re-engagement party. There's Cynthia, of course, and Jay and Ty from the office, Rudy, Nessa, Susan, Dan—I'd really rather not invite everyone. Oh, and James and his students, maybe—do we invite James's students? A couple of them I know better than Dan. And music. Live. I know, we'll wait for June, and then we'll open up the house and dance outdoors, here, under the stars. It's time we learned to dance proper, with counts and dips and foxtrots. Nessa gives lessons, did you know that? I miss her. I'm hungry. Did you save me any broth?

She waits, but he does not respond. As before, stars blanket the sky.

She sits beside him and wraps them both in her sleeping bag. At last, dawn breaks. She watches him, but he seems oblivious.

ANNIE (Cont'd)

Nelson . . . It's going to be day soon. Baby, the clouds are gone. Aren't you hungry? You should make me pancakes. Goddammit, make me pancakes, Nelson!

He does not respond. She kisses him and stands.

ANNIE (Cont'd)

We're going.

She walks away, then turns back to him. He has not noticed. Finally, she exits.

For a long moment nothing happens.

Thunder rumbles faintly. NELSON peers into the distance.

Another rumble. NELSON stumbles to his feet. More thunderclaps, louder and louder.

NELSON laughs. Thunder crashes. He dances rapturously as the lights fade to black.

End of play.