

DEPOSITION

a play in three acts

by Brent Englar

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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.

*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 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?

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.

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.