

SCENES FROM A STAGE PLAY
The Sandpaper Dragon
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This scene from the play, "The Sandpaper Dragon," is set in the East Village in the 1970's. Paul, a successful headhunter (personnel recruiter) has decided to follow his dream and open up a woodworking studio, hopefully to become an elite cabinetry shop. To do this, he exposes his wife, Anita, to a life of entrepreneurial challenges and a downgraded lifestyle that fills her with disdain and despair. In this scene, they debate their situation with Paul coming up with a disturbing solution to their dilemma.

INT. APARTMENT. EAST SIXTH STREET. NEW YORK -- AFTERNOON

MED Paul and Anita both pacing back and forth in their small apartment.

PAUL

You're giving me a headache!

ANITA

(obviously continuing an argument)

I don't want to live here anymore. Everyday before I get up, I have to check if that somebody behind the staircase is only nodding out or awake and dangerous- in which case I have to wait until he leaves or someone removes him. I'm sick of our problems.

PAUL

Problems. Big fucking deal. Know anyone who doesn't have any?

ANITA

People who don't live on Sixth Street.

PAUL

Really? Do those folks on Fifth Avenue look any less troubled? Maybe it's the pressure of a high-paying job instead of three extra kids to feed. Maybe it's a five thousand annual raise that didn't come through, but it's still tension, still the type of pain that tears into a man's guts. I don't think we're going to avoid pain by moving. Life is suffering.

ANITA

Could you leave the freakin' Buddha for another conversation. For Christ's sakes, Paul, can't a person have some choice as to his own variety of despair? Can't I choose to despair in a house with a rock garden and a picket fence instead of despairing in a crummy little rat-trap with roaches, surrounded by an ocean of heroin addicts.

PAUL

But I want to live here, Anita.

ANITA

Why?

PAUL

Because it's INFORMATIVE. Because this poverty seems realer to me than stupid 86th and Madison. It's right there in your face—no pretensions, no bullshit. Its transparent ugliness without any phoney sugar coating. I can swallow this pain without choking on it.

ANITA

Why should you be choking anyway? It's not your pain. And you surely don't feel guilty, do you? You didn't make these people suffer.

PAUL

I feel pain, Anita, because I know that behind each of these hungry children there's a father without a decent job- and, behind him and thousands of men like him, there's another man, a man with his own small apartment building, a doorman, a small garden in the middle of his lobby and a wife who buys her clothes at Bergdoff Goodman's or another man, who owns a rubber factory, who lives in a mansion in-

ANITA

Good God, Paul. That's not your fault, Paul. It's the economy. It's also people's own inertia and lack of concern for their own welfare.

PAUL

Yeah, maybe- But these people aren't brought up like we were- I just can't forget those little Puerto Rican children on the fourth floor. We don't see them anymore. Maria won't look me in the eyes. Simon and his brother ignore me.

ANITA

We can't have those children up here every minute.

PAUL

Things would have been all right if we hadn't given that damned party and tripped out. I thought it would be just an ordinary party with ice cream and cake and funny paper hats. But I never would have guessed that those kids had never had a party like that. I don't think I've ever seen children as happy as that during the first part of the evening. The problem was that...

ANITA

They wouldn't leave. They kept ducking under the couch, sneaking in the side door when someone else was leaving. It was scary. They were like- party addicts. I don't know what to call it.

PAUL

I think one of the saddest moments of my life was making those kids go home.

ANITA

Thre you go again. You are just swimming in upper class guilt. Why in God's name should we put up with those kids all night? Even after the party, they kept coming back at odd hours, making noise... until I had to tell them not to ever come back- for my own sanity. I've enough trouble with the idea of being a mother to my own children, much less taking care of children who have one.

PAUL

Their mother works all day. An old aunt takes care of them when they're not in school.

ANITA

Why did they have to keep on coming back- again and again?

PAUL

They don't have any place to play, Anita. Do you know how small their apartment is? I don't know how many times I've seen Manuel run out into the street and, in five seconds, a whole gang of little delinquents pounce on him- not really because they're bullies, but because Manuel's the only fun around. You can see how little he is-

ANITA

It's not your fault- and there's little or nothing you can do about it. I think you should be grateful for the options you have. Because you can move out of here whenever you want. You can afford to look at these people like little germs in your moral microscope, because you know damn well you have an escape valve. You're all set- with your goddamn credentials.

PAUL

Credentials?

ANITA

You have only half a year to finish up college. You could go back any time. Your parents would help you. You know that. With your record as a recruiter, you could move right back into a responsible job anytime you wanted. Sid might even take you back.

PAUL

So? Isn't that good? Doesn't that give you some security?

ANITA

The security that it's always possible to leave this hellhole. Well, that's probably better than thinking I have to stay here forever. But since I am terrified living here- on a minute by minute basis- do you really think that gives me some kind of real relief?

PAUL

I don't know. I find it more interesting than terrifying.

ANITA

I'm sure you do. But I wonder how interesting you'll find it, when I pack up my bags and get the hell out of here.

PAUL

Without me?

ANITA

Yes. Don't be shocked. I don't want to be gruesome, but why not? I'm probably not your happiest bedfellow.

PAUL

I'm not going to leave you.

ANITA

You might. You never can tell, Paul It's been done before.

PAUL

O.K. Suppose I did?

ANITA

I'm completely lost. I can't afford a good apartment without a decent job. And I can't get a job unless I have a degree in something.

PAUL

What do you want?

ANITA

Let me finish up my year and a half in City College and go teach.

PAUL

I don't want you to teach.

ANITA

Why do you keep saying that?

PAUL

Because in reality, we both know you don't want to. What else made you get up and leave Barnard in your Junior year?

ANITA

I left school because of you. You know that.

PAUL

Why don't you give me a little time?

ANITA

Because someone's got to be practical around here. You and Charlie screw around in that sleazy loft- he, because he's got some kind of crazy addiction to woodworking- and you- because you've got some kind of psychological problem with white collar work.

PAUL

I need this work to experience who I really am. Life is not real without it. When I'm in an office, I'm lost.

ANITA

Lost, but making money head over foot. That's where your true calling is, Paul. White collar magic. You're a master at it. Face it.

PAUL

Yeah, I'm a master at manipulating people. Nothing to be proud of, believe me.

ANITA

Well, you seem to have found your match in these stupid people who come into your shop. I don't see how it's possible to keep your sanity in that miserable world you now live in... with your customers constantly bitching, with Charlie and you nearly coming to blows every day, with the incredible money problems we're having.

PAUL

It'll get better. I know it. Even now, I see signs of it. Sometimes, when I'm sanding, I feel this strange expansion of consciousness. Funny, it's not when I'm designing or doing fancy routing- just something simple, like sanding. Maybe it's why they start zen monks out in the kitchen.

ANITA

I don't know what you're talking about.

PAUL

It's a kind of feeling- like I'm being wrapped in a blanket of light... only that light is sweet, almost penetrating.

ANITA

I'm supposed to starve so you can wrap yourself in a blanket?

PAUL

It's funny it only seems to happen when I'm sanding.

ANITA

It's too bad we can't eat sandpaper. We could use your scraps for a salad or pudding. A chocolate sandpaper mousse. How's that, Paul! A change from that awful Good Shepherd cereal you keep buying.

PAUL

It's good for you. It's got nuts and raisins and...

ANITA

(somewhat tenderly)

You're an idiot.

PAUL

You know there's more to life than financial security. That's all you focus on these days.

ANITA

What else is there to think about when you live in a little black hole in the middle of some rotten, decaying tenement buildings? The only real pleasure I get is from a broken, little AM radio with a cracked, plastic chassis? Everyday, I make one tiny, seemingly insignificant prayer: Please, Dear God, do not let that little radio completely self-destruct because, if it does, I will go completely out of my mind.

PAUL

Good God! If you had something constructive to do, you wouldn't feel this way. I keep telling you, find a more creative outlet for your energies.

ANITA

Who can think about creativity when you go to sleep hungry? Here in New York in the twentieth century.

PAUL

Stop being so melodramatic. You always manage to eat.

He pinches her stomach. She draws away.

ANITA

Don't touch me.

PAUL

You haven't lost any weight since you've been here.

ANITA

Haven't you ever seen pictures of the Germans during the depression? You can get fat on potatoes.

PAUL

You look all right.

ANITA

All we had last night was soup. I was hungry when I went to sleep last night.

PAUL

The trouble is you're spoiled.

ANITA

I'm not. I'm hungry. I can't stand this. You don't care whether I'm dead or alive.

PAUL

Are you going to start that again? Please-

ANITA

Just don't be surprised.

PAUL

Bullshit. Grow up!

ANITA

If you don't get me out of here...

PAUL

Look around you. Other people live here. They're not committing suicide because their garbage isn't being collected every day.

ANITA

I understand, Paul. Poverty for you is a big adventure. When I was a kid, I never wore anything that wasn't a hand-me-down from Natalie. My father didn't have the time or energy to clothe us or feed us like other kids in the neighborhood. All he could think of was my mother- and the money she needed for x-rays and medicine.

PAUL

At least you had something to wear. How about that old crone on Fifth Street who sells rags freshly hand-picked from the garbage dump in the lot around the corner of First Avenue? Now, that's real poverty. And I'll be she doesn't have an older sister to depend on.

ANITA

Why, that old woman's crazy! Oh, God, Paul, why are you so mean? All I wantd was to finish up school, earn a little money on my own.

PAUL

I don't want you to go back to college. I want you to something important, something creative...

ANITA

What's so creative about being a carpenter and uncreative about being a teacher?

PAUL

You aren't a school teacher. I know it. And, goddamn it, you do, too.

ANITA

Why are you so convinced about that?

PAUL

What did you study in school?

ANITA

Art history.

PAUL

And why did you study that?

ANITA

Because there was no real fine arts major.

PAUL

So?

ANITA

So I compromised. I drew on the side. I was all right, Paul. I liked college.

PAUL

That's a bunch of crap. I was there. You left college to be with me.

ANITA

Yes, I did, Paul. I was hypnotized by your good looks, your energy- and your promises.

PAUL

Don't put it on me, Anita. College bored the shit out of you.

ANITA

After you came in my life, yes. But before... no. I got good marks. I had a lot of friends- both in the sorority and out of it. On weekends, I used to go on dates in Philadelphia- until you came along.

PAUL

You told me, for sure, that you weren't happy. That you wanted to be an artist. I remember.

ANITA

Look- all I said to you, once, was that I wished I had studied painting. You're blowing it all out of proportion.

PAUL

So, it wasn't true...

ANITA

Of course. I exaggerated. It was a casual comment. How many times do I have to say it?

PAUL

I don't know what to believe. Do your words meaning anything?

ANITA

What do you want me to do, Paul. All right, do you want the truth?

(coquettishly)

Secretly, Paul- secretly, I always wanted to be a dancer.

PAUL

Are you serious?

ANITA

I told you once. But you don't remember. I settled for art, but I wanted to be a dancer. But I was too much of a chicken shit. My parents would have positively freaked out. I would have to have dropped out of college and gone to a professional dance school.

PAUL

You're pulling my leg. You never said a thing. Well, maybe-

ANITA

I told you in that stupid sandwich stop.

Paul

Was this the Martha Graham conversation?

ANITA

Yes. Ever since I was a little girl, I worshipped Martha Graham. Mom used to take me to watch dance on weekends. I always knew what I wanted to be. I took dance lessons since I was seven- until college.

PAUL

I knew you liked Graham, but I didn't get you liked dance so much.

ANITA

That's because you only listen with half an ear. You only hear what you want to.

PAUL

I thought your mother forced you to go.

ANITA

No, I often forced her. But, in the end, it didn't matter. I gave it up. I don't know why.

PAUL

Are you sure? Why is important.

ANITA

It's hard to put it into words, Paul. But most dancers are like football or baseball players. They have a relatively short life time. So you dance- and then your life is over, something which you probably love more than anything. The thought of it- well, it felt like I would be shortening my lifetime. A kind of early death.

PAUL

(quite seriously)

I don't understand.

ANITA

Maybe it's just me- but, for me, proficiency in dance is organically linked to the body. But not so with dance. You wither away all too soon. Thinking about it as a career was like thinking about going to an early grave.

PAUL

But couldn't you teach it? You don't have to continue to dance.

ANITA

I thought of that, Paul. But there's no getting away from it. Dance is marked by its connection to the body. It will not break you free from the body's frailty. But, still, I think my attitude was wrong.

PAUL

Why, Anita?

ANITA

Better to grow old in the beauty of dance than to live without beauty, without music... But it's too late, now.

PAUL

Why is that?

ANITA

I'm twenty-five. My body's no good anymore. I'm too old.

PAUL

Are you sure?

ANITA

Who can become a dancer at twenty-five?

PAUL

You're still limber. I've seen you do leg stretches.

ANITA

Don't be silly. Dance lessons are expensive. We don't have the money.

PAUL

We'll do it.

ANITA

You're playing the Sandman again. We don't need any more silly dreams. Look where they landed us?

PAUL

Give me the phone.

ANITA

(a little fearfully)

What are you going to do?

PAUL

(emphatically)

I said- give me the phone!

She hands it to him. He dials.

PAUL (CONT'D)

(on the phone)

Hello, Charlie... I got bad news. No, everything's all right. System WILL send it this afternoon. That's not the problem. If you look, you'll see the sanding's already finished. Will you shut up for a minute? I'm quitting. I have to. Yes, I know we have an agreement. But something's come up. Anita needs lessons. I can't continue it on thirty dollars a week. Yes, I know this whole thing was originally my idea. What are you bitching about? George is just waiting to move in. I know we didn't make any decision... But, man, you sometimes gotta do it on your own... Well, I think I'll go back to the agency for another year. Of course, I'll hate it. But this is more important. Dance. Yes, that's what I said. She wants to dance. No, I just can't be that selfish. I'll just keep taking lessons and really get ready this time. Yeah, actual carpentry lessons would be a good thing. I know- I know- you still don't think I don't know how to hold a hammer. O.K. Think what you like. I'm backing out, anyway. I'm sorry. Look, I'll talk to you tomorrow.

ANITA

What did you just do? You're quitting the shop. Just like that? You didn't even think about it.

PAUL

You were always complaining. Why worry about my decision?

ANITA

You didn't quit because I was complaining.

PAUL

That's right. Before it was bullshit. But now there's a real reason for leaving. Your vocation.

ANITA

You mean what I just said? Dance? What's real about that? I told you it was impossible.

PAUL

You also told me you regretted your decision. It was a real expression of you, Anita. A real expression. This is what I've been waiting for since we got married. I know what I want to do- and I can wait. But if you're ever going to dance, you've got to start right now.

ANITA

But I don't know anything about dancing.

PAUL

But I thought you said you had lessons since you were seven years old.

ANITA

(flushed)

That was before college-, canturies ago. I'd have to start all over again. You don't expect me to do that, do you?

Paul nods.

ANITA (CONT'D)

But what if I don't want to take lessons. What if I don't have the capacity?

PAUL

Better learn.

ANITA

What if I don't want to?

PAUL

I think you know the answer to that.

Silence.

PAUL

I'm taking you seriously. I just gave up the one thing- the only thing- I am completely sure of, the only thing I want. For you...

He looks straight at her. She turns towards him

ANITA

You should have. Not for-

PAUL

Listen, I've got to make some phone calls before five. Why don't you go out and shop around?

ANITA

For what?

PAUL

For the right schools.

She doesn't understand.

PAUL (CONT'D)

Dance schools.

ANITA

You're serious?

PAUL

I am.

(pause)

Don't come back until you've found one.

ANITA

You can't do this, Paul. It isn't fair.

PAUL

Now, you'll have money, as much as you need-
for now.

ANITA

You're throwing me out on the street.

PAUL

Not throwing. Gently placing. What are you
worried about? It will probably take you just
a few hours.

ANITA

What if I can't find one? Or don't want to.

PAUL

You heard what I said.

ANITA

I can find a school for dance, Paul. But how
do I find a school for making dreams?

He hands her a PURSE and watches her as she puts her COAT
on. While she is doing this, she stares at him intently.
CLOSE-IN as he fishes into his pocket and takes out some
MONEY, opens her PURSE, takes out her WALLET and carefully
tucks the MONEY in it.

PAUL

Better find one, Anita. One of those schools.

She gives him a sharp look. CAMERA FOLLOWS her into
bathroom where she throws some TOILET ARTICLES into her
PURSE. FAR SHOT, glaring at him from bathroom before she
stalks out. Paul begins to make phone calls.