

The Adulterous Woman

(Based on the short story by Albert Camus)

by

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The Adulterous Woman

DESCRIPTION

Staring out across the desert, in a country not her own, Janine finds a perfection that she had not anticipated and does not yet know if it will accept her.

CHARACTERS

- JANINE, not young
- MARCEL, her husband, slightly older

SETTING

- The desert

TIME

- Fluid

MISCELLANEOUS

- Ordinary clothes under cloth coats
- Underwear for MARCEL: white tee-shirt, boxers, socks
- Underwear for JANINE: white brassiere, white panties, white slip, stockings
- Two chairs
- Sound effects: wind, a bus driving (either recorded or by live acoustic effects)
- A sample case or small suitcase; inside the case should be a white bedsheet

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Scene 1

In the darkness, sound of wind and a bus engine winding along. A tight pin-light on JANINE's hand as it moves.

JANINE

The fly. The fly. Slagging through the cold thuggish air. The fly out of place. Out of season. Dying as it wandered. Withering as it died.

Lights up slowly: JANINE seated next to MARCEL; under her chair is his sample case. Her hand, the "fly," continues to move, then "lands" on MARCEL's hand.

JANINE

It cut curves and volutes in the air, then -- on my husband's hand, Marcel's thick, sure, numb hand. He didn't notice. I did. Then off it went. Lost. Cold. Free.

JANINE stops her hand movements.

MARCEL

What a country! What a country!

JANINE

We were the only white people on the bus.

MARCEL

Look at all of them -- asleep!

JANINE

The natives seemed to sway effortlessly with the bus' pitch.

MARCEL

No drive!

JANINE

They seemed to take up no room --

MARCEL

Janine!

JANINE

No room at all.

(to MARCEL)

Yes.

MARCEL

Is my sample case there?

JANINE kicks it with her heel.

JANINE

Yes.

MARCEL

Good.

JANINE

I want to bend over to see if I can see it -- but I can't.

MARCEL

Valuable stuff there.

JANINE

I've turned thick-waisted.

MARCEL

You're sure it's there?

JANINE

Yes.

(to herself)

Not like when Marcel knew me to first know me -- young and serpentine -- I watched how they swayed, like flames, taking up no more room than needed --

MARCEL

(patting her hand heavily)

Don't worry, my little one -- we'll make out all right. We will grow large again!

The sound of the wind grows higher, sharper; the bus drops out. JANINE moves out of her seat downstage. As she speaks, her hands move.

JANINE

The sand -- it scratches at the window, it scrawls unreadable -- The fly, not meant to be there, but there, making hieroglyphs I cannot read. "We'll make out all right." The wind keening higher and higher -- lamentation. "Grow large again." Cannot bend without losing breath -- no thin-waisted jewel. Taking up no room. And Marcel, there -- there -- his sample case, dry goods, this country, this desert, trying to be "all right."

The wind cuts out -- sudden silence.

JANINE

Nothing had turned out as I had expected.

Wind and bus sounds start again, underscoring. JANINE moves to her seat.

JANINE

How long until we get there?

MARCEL

Who knows? Where is "there" any "there" in this God-forsaken -- Sorry, my dove, I'm just nervous. I can feel that this trip will put us back on the road. That's why I wanted you to come.

JANINE

Your lucky charm.

MARCEL

My lucky charm, you are! That's why you had to come.

JANINE touches his face.

MARCEL

It will all be as before.

JANINE

As before.

MARCEL

I know that --

JANINE

Ssshhh.

MARCEL

Yes -- all right. You're right. No need to -- Look at them -- at least we are not like them. Sell, do our business, money once more -- I will provide for you again.

JANINE

Ssshhh. Ssshhh.

On the second "ssshh," JANINE's hand becomes the "fly."

JANINE

There it was again, pocking the window but with no real heart --

MARCEL

I will provide.

JANINE

Stupid instinct for wanting to be outside.

MARCEL

As before, Janine.

JANINE

And the wind and dust outside --

MARCEL

I'm a good provider, aren't I?

JANINE

-- ripping back layer after layer to get inside until -- what?

MARCEL

I have done my best.

JANINE

What is after the last layer?

MARCEL

It will be like before.

JANINE

What will happen when inside meets out?

MARCEL

I will make good.

JANINE

What will happen when, last layer gone --

MARCEL

I will make it good for us.

JANINE

In and out make a "there" that is not there?

A screech of tires. The bus comes to an abrupt halt and the engine dies. Wind continues.

MARCEL

What now?

(shouts to the driver)

What now? Oh, God grant us -- sand in the carburetor. Look at the bastard grinning -- "I can fix eet, I can fix eet, no problem -- a leettle sand, a leettle wipe, no problem." And -
- Lord save us! -- he leaves the door open!

MARCEL is agitated -- JANINE reaches out to him, but it is not soothing, not strong. Just as she touches him, her hand seems to take her off in a different direction; she moves downstage.

JANINE

My hand -- on his rounded bear-like back -- imitating tenderness -- And then, there, outside the bus, in the fog and wind, like smoke turned hard -- I saw them appear out of nothing, kerchiefs pulled to their eyes, widebrim hats lashed down tight, wrapped in their strange perpetual cotton and wool, swaying, swaying, watching -- but not me -- but outside. Out. There.

MARCEL

Shepherds.

JANINE

Shepherds.

MARCEL

Nomads. Without a home.

JANINE

Where do they live?

MARCEL

Where? Out there? -- the "there" that is not anywhere in this country? Where is that driver?

JANINE

None around us had any luggage to speak of --

MARCEL

Ah, there he is!

JANINE

We with a trunk and cases -- thick-waisted.

The "bus" starts up.

MARCEL

Fixed?

JANINE

One raises a hand --

MARCEL

Good!

JANINE

-- to the bus --

MARCEL
We're off!

JANINE
Like releasing a bird --

MARCEL
(to the driver)
Yes, yes, no problem, "leettle problem."

JANINE
Then gone.

MARCEL
Go! Go!

JANINE
I ached --

MARCEL
Go!

JANINE
-- for that bird to come down and tell me what
that hand had said.

MARCEL
Look, Janine, look -- the town! We've made it,
my lucky charm! Come sit down -- this bus'll
drop you like a stone if you're not careful!

JANINE sits.

JANINE
Like a stone.

MARCEL
Like a stone into deep water. Come, let me hold
you.

MARCEL puts his arm around her.

MARCEL
This is where it begins again, Janine.

JANINE
All over again.

MARCEL
All over again.

Lights down except for pin-light on JANINE's hand.

JANINE

The fly -- gone. Perhaps stolen by the wind when
the door opened to the outside. Lost. Cold.
Free.

* * * * *

Scene 2

JANINE steps downstage. MARCEL takes the sample kit.

MARCEL

(to the driver)

Bring that trunk down!

JANINE

I stand, planted, in the hotel room, Marcel's
command rising up birdlike through the slatted
afternoon light.

MARCEL

Careful!

JANINE

Whitewashed walls, thick and sure.

MARCEL

(mimes flipping a coin to the driver)

Good, good!

JANINE

The wind now sounds like the ocean. Not full of
nomads. I drown in the wind so that I can
breathe.

MARCEL

Janine?

MARCEL sits, the two chairs now chairs at a table in the hotel
restaurant.

JANINE

Breathe.

MARCEL

A quick solid lunch, eh?

JANINE

Ocean wraps around me --

MARCEL

(to the waiter)

We'll have the pork -- cook it well!

JANINE

Thin waist --

MARCEL

And coffee. And quick -- we have business to do.

JANINE

Refreshed -- licked clean --

MARCEL

Janine! What are you staring at?

JANINE is startled, then comes to sit.

JANINE

Nothing.

MARCEL

We'll do well this afternoon -- times are hard for everybody. They'll buy once they see what I have!

JANINE

Of course they will.

MARCEL

And with you there, my lucky charm -- ah, I can feel it!

MARCEL grabs his case and will work his way along an arc upstage: the various merchants he has to meet during his rounds. He will mime showing them things from his case, arguing, bartering, selling, etc., completing his arc by coming back to JANINE. For MARCEL his first transaction does not go well, but by the end of the arc he has met with several successes.

JANINE

Like the fly I followed Marcel, trying to be lucky. I hung to the edges -- I rode the rim of the low serious voice Marcel thought sly and business-like.

We wove through back streets, old streets, stores crammed with dark strangers -- they ignored me -- they stole my breath away. I hung here -- and here -- then there -- trying to be lucky but my heart both aching and indifferent as I looked upon this man working hard to provide more of the world to me -- this once unfurnished university student, thrilled by his philosophies and awed to grateful by his hard desire for someone who did not then understand why that kind of desire -- so

natural and expected -- would be so hard for her
to --

I landed in his hands, released bird thankful for
being needed. I discovered I had a talent for
being needed. How need -- changes. Now it's
money for him, not the aeriels of thought -- now
it's provide -- Such a lucky charm am I.

MARCEL is near the end of his arc; he has a success.

MARCEL

Aha, brother! I knew we could make that
exchange.

JANINE

What will happen when inside meets out?

MARCEL moves to the next one.

JANINE

What happens after the last layer peeled away?

MARCEL moves to the next one.

MARCEL

Hard times -- we have to work together.

JANINE

His mood brightened. His voice hustled me.

MARCEL

My charm!

JANINE

I am tired.

MARCEL

This is my last. Don't go -- watch.

JANINE

I hung on the edge -- hieroglyph --

MARCEL

(to the "merchant")

Best quality you will find, you deal with me.

JANINE

Unable to read myself.

MARCEL

I knew you would see it my way!

MARCEL picks up his case and moves to JANINE.

MARCEL

My charm -- you have done enough for today. We are all in this business together -- sink each other or float each other -- never cared for that cut-throat way of --

JANINE

(interrupting)

I am tired.

MARCEL

Yes, yes -- this cold, these people --

JANINE

The nomads.

MARCEL

(laughing)

Not us, child -- not us! We have a home!

JANINE

I did not want to go back to the hotel.

MARCEL

Let's go back to the hotel -- dinner, wine --

JANINE

Yes. No.

MARCEL

What?

JANINE

It's still early.

MARCEL

But you're tired.

JANINE

Yes. No.

MARCEL

What is it, my pet?

JANINE

He was feeling solicitous --

MARCEL

Janine?

JANINE

His day had provided --

MARCEL

Look at me.

JANINE

I could. Not. Return to that white room --

MARCEL puts his hand on JANINE's shoulder.

MARCEL

What, my charm?

JANINE responds to MARCEL's touch as if a bird had landed on her shoulder. JANINE takes his hand tenderly.

JANINE

Look at the light.

MARCEL

Yes?

JANINE

The hotel manager told me that if the wind lifted -- and see, it has! -- then to climb the water tower to see the last light.

MARCEL

The water tower.

JANINE

Yes.

MARCEL

This you want to do?

JANINE

Yes.

MARCEL

Well, then -- all right.

Lights change. The chairs are now the railing on the water tower. The chair seats face the audience. JANINE arrives first, breathing heavily. MARCEL follows behind her. As JANINE speaks, she uses her hands to illustrate.

JANINE

I lose track after my first steps --

MARCEL

One hundred and sixty-five steps.

JANINE

The clouds had fled -- the sun balances like a forge-hot nailhead on the horizon.

MARCEL

I swear I left a lung back there --

JANINE

From the east the ample bruise of the coming
night floods west --

MARCEL

Both lungs --

JANINE

On the edge of the town I can see tents --

MARCEL joins her.

MARCEL

(pointing)

Shepherds.

JANINE

Yes. Dark bodies moving -- lights -- this
unsayable alphabet -- right there -- there --

MARCEL

This thing actually sways in the wind!

JANINE suddenly moves around the chair and stands on the seat.

MARCEL

Janine! Get back here!

JANINE

Thick-waisted me stands up on the railing --
trying to grab the coming stars --

MARCEL grabs her around her thighs/knees as if to keep her from
falling.

MARCEL

Get down!

JANINE

The wind changes to ocean -- waves --

MARCEL

Janine!

JANINE

Sun melts -- and the unstressed waters --

MARCEL

Janine! Please!

JANINE

-- rise from my sad ankles to my regretful hair -
-

MARCEL

This is foolish!

JANINE

And I feel this nothing not like the nothing I
have felt before -- been feeling -- I am nothing
-- thank God! -- a flood tide -- and I can almost
read --

MARCEL

Right now!

JANINE comes back to awareness and climbs down.

MARCEL

That was foolish!

JANINE

Yes.

MARCEL

I could have lost you.

JANINE

Lost me, yes -- I am sorry.
(to herself)
How could I tell him?
(to MARCEL)
Let's go back.

MARCEL

They should lock this -- this is unsafe.

Lights down except for pin-light on JANINE's hand.

JANINE

In the shepherds' tents they light lanterns --
flames write on the walls. Wind crosses into
water into wind. Earth runs away to darkness.
And I am nothing. Lost. Cold.

Lights out, then up again immediately.

* * * * *

Scene 3

JANINE and MARCEL slowly undress until they are in their underclothes:
boxers, tee-shirt, white socks for him; a white slip or shift,
possibly stockings for her. MARCEL takes the bedsheet out of his

sample case. They sit on the chairs as if in bed, and MARCEL spreads the sheet over them.

JANINE

He tried to be kind during dinner, but he was bothered.

MARCEL

I could have lost you.

JANINE

It was foolish, yes. I don't know what possessed me.

(to herself)

Which I only say for him.

MARCEL

Tomorrow we'll finish up, then we'll leave.

JANINE

Yes. Good

MARCEL

It is hard to be away from home.

JANINE

Yes. It is. Sleep.

MARCEL closes his eyes, breathes evenly.

JANINE

The darkness, the cold, thicken this room. His warmth -- his warmth -- I want to be held down by his warmth, like an anchor, like a lock.

JANINE turns to MARCEL, lays her head on his shoulder.

JANINE

I want to be so deeply asleep that I am kept from thinking.

JANINE puts an arm across his chest.

JANINE

His warmth tied across my mouth to keep the air away from the words forcing their way up my throat --

JANINE pulls MARCEL closer; he continues to sleep undisturbed.

JANINE

I do not need to breathe -- Marcel, pet, keep me from breathing! -- cut my throat so that these

words cannot reach the air! The words gag me, I
cannot swallow --

JANINE's hand suddenly moves: the fly.

JANINE

There -- again -- The razz of its wings -- how
has it found me -- how have you found me, you
dark nothing that calls me out --

JANINE's hand "lands" on MARCEL's chest, fingers spread.

JANINE

Heartbeat, yes -- but that means nothing.

JANINE puts her hand against her own chest.

JANINE

Heartbeat, yes -- but it means nothing. The
words have escaped. They have escaped. I am
sorry, Marcel.

Slowly, inexorably, JANINE slides out from under the sheet and puts on
her coat, making sure that MARCEL is not disturbed. Once out of the
"room," she comes quickly downstage: she is on the water tower,
breathing heavily, having just run up a flight of stairs. As she
speaks, she looks at the stars, the shepherds encamped outside the
city, everything.

JANINE

Look -- just look -- see -- oh --
(breathes, laughs softly)
No slim-waisted girl standing here, eh! How I
could once slice through --
(gestures)
How we could all once slice through -- Ah,
matron!
(dismisses it)
This air --
(breathes)
-- cuts me -- good --
(breathes deeply several times)
-- burns -- all the way down --
(finally catches her breath, pauses)
Marcel --
(catches herself)
Janine, look, just look, just -- look. But
Marcel -- Marcel -- I have betrayed you. Am
betraying you, as I breathe, just by breathing.

Who would have guessed? Being so needed, wanting
your need to keep away the -- from my -- and only
end full of fear held in a safe man's arms.

JANINE takes off her coat, pauses for breath, a visible chill.

JANINE

The craziness or stuffiness of life, eh? -- a viper in the sheets. Who would have guessed -- no fault, Marcel, of yours, none. The harbor is never to blame.

So I am here. These stars. Shepherds scattered in the stones. This rough-handed railing. Cold air cupping -- me. What the knife-edge, dragged unwilling but desiring, must feel against the oiled whetstone.

(surprised, pleased)

Listen to me! The words -- ! Cut right into me, out of me --

(touching herself)

-- here -- and here -- and here -- a touch not safe, not secure, not warm, but oh! -- oh! -- the talons raking across the palm as the bird pushes away -- oh! Listen to me! More. More. More.

(holds onto herself tightly)

This thick-waisted ordinary woman -- once so slender! ready! to push away! -- Marcel, so surprised that such lightness said yes to you, grateful -- I grateful for that -- fattened up now, slaughter-ready -- oh, listen to that! no, not that! yes, more cold, more -- here -- and here -- and here -- enough! -- this long fade into so many details -- enough! -- little daily losses -- enough! -- that turn inevitably into nothing but -- enough! -- fear -- enough!

JANINE kneels, her knees spread apart, clutching her slip between her legs.

JANINE

The stars, falling, flare out -- if I can fall like that -- all uncentered, spinning uncentered -- if I can have no center -- Ah, yes -- yes -- the invitation offered here -- and here -- and here -- a touch not safe, not secure, not warm but, oh, accepted -- let me fall open, split, flared, empty husked, eyes bleached, heart dry -- fall into the long slow dark spinning ocean's mouth -- accepted, accepted -- until -- until -- until -- I am so empty I am not afraid anymore, not afraid anymore, not afraid anymore, not afraid anymore --

A shudder runs through and through JANINE, a mix of the cold and of giving herself over to her own body. On the downside arc of her release, JANINE looks deliberately, intimately, at the audience.

After several beats of this, MARCEL awakens with an abrupt shout, scared out of his sleep by a dream. JANINE quickly grabs her coat and puts it on, then rushes to the "room" and the bedside. MARCEL looks at her, seeing her yet not recognizing her, the way a person feels first stumbling out of sleep, his face afraid and uncomprehending. JANINE sits on the edge of the "bed," touching MARCEL's face, her own voice sorrowful.

JANINE

It's nothing, dear. It's nothing. Nothing.
Really. It is nothing at all. Go back. We'll
go back.

Lights fade as MARCEL continues to stare at her.