

The Horse and the Sparrow

A 10-Minute play

By

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Version 10.07.19

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Characters

Sandra Williams: In her early 40's. A city magistrate.

Ben Stepnik: In his early 40's. A former rock guitarist, a sometime handyman, and a general screw-up. He is wearing an eye-patch.

(The checkout line in a garden store. SANDRA has a large shrub wrapped in burlap in her supermarket cart, hand-cart, or something similar. BEN, behind her on line, holds a much smaller plant, a Peace Lily, in his hands. Actors are frozen.)

(Lights.)

BEN: That's a *big* plant you have there.

SANDRA: There's a big bare spot in my yard.

BEN: Well, you're on your way to filling it. You're going to lug it yourself?

SANDRA: Yes.

BEN: Really?

SANDRA: (Emphatically.) Yes.

BEN: They'll put it in your car if you want. But you're going to have to get it into your yard and dig a pretty damn big hole.

SANDRA: You're volunteering?

BEN: Well, I hadn't thought that far ahead. I was just commenting.

SANDRA: Do you really think I'd invite a total stranger back to my house?

BEN: We're not exactly strangers. We've spent some time together.

(SANDRA looks quizzically at BEN.)

BEN: You suspended my driver's license. For 30 days. Not so bad. You were actually very nice about it.

(SANDRA looks more carefully at BEN.)

SANDRA: Oh my God. You're the guy who was riding his motorcycle with a ladder across the bike and paint cans and other junk hanging off the ladder.

BEN: That would be me. About a year ago.

SANDRA: I've been a magistrate for 17 years, and I believe that was the stupidest thing that ever came into my courtroom. Congratulations on that. Now that we have this great conversation going, we shouldn't hold up other people in the checkout line.

BEN: OK.

(She pulls her cart out of the line. He follows her.)

SANDRA: You weren't wearing an eye patch.

BEN: No, that happened more recently. I do carpentry, but I don't always wear goggles. Actually, I don't ever wear them. I had goggles years ago, but they disappeared somewhere.

SANDRA: I'm sorry about your eye. You know, I shouldn't be talking to someone whose been before me in court—even traffic court.

BEN: OK. Well, maybe we just *met* here in the garden store. Maybe you don't even know who I am. No one could expect you to remember every case you had. Plus, I have the eye patch now.

SANDRA: Well, I *do* remember you. But I don't remember the circumstances. Why were you driving around with the ladder?

BEN: I had a job painting a house. Interior, I do interior painting. But my car broke down, and I figured I'd just use my motorcycle. I needed the work. The truth is it *was* safe enough. Everything was balanced right across the fuel tank, and on curves I steadied the ladder with my hands. There was no need for the cop to have stopped me.

SANDRA: We don't need to talk about that part. I am truly sorry about the eye. When you asked me about carrying the plant, were you thinking about getting paid?

BEN: No, not at all. I was just talking, commenting. I wasn't coming on to you. I wasn't looking for work. I get by OK. I just like to talk when I see people who look . . . friendly. I'm embarrassed now.

SANDRA: (*Laughing.*) Well, I'm guilty too. When you started to talk, I started answering. I'm not sure I'd call myself "friendly," but I guess I was today. (*Laughing.*) Since we're such buddies, come back to the house with me. We can deal with my plant together. Not that I couldn't do it, but it *is* big and heavy.

BEN: Yes, I'd like that. I have *nothing* to do this afternoon.

SANDRA: You should know that as a single woman I think about my personal security. I'm not going to be more specific, but you *do* understand?

BEN: Yeah. OK. Whatever.

SANDRA: When we've checked out, I'll show you my car. Bring yours around and follow me. I live close by. I'll drive slow.

BEN: OK.

SANDRA: I'm Sandra. Sandra Williams. You just heard "Judge Williams" in the courtroom.

BEN: I'm Ben. Ben Stepnik. I'm sure I forgot "Judge Williams" as soon as I left the courtroom. But I *did* remember *you*, didn't I.

(Blackout.)

Scene 2

(SANDRA and BEN are sitting around a patio table in her backyard. He may have some dirt on his shirt. Actors are frozen while drinking iced tea. The pitcher sits on the table.)

(Lights.)

BEN: They said, I'd be on the "management track," that I'd manage the coffee shop once it opened. I worked for weeks. I installed the counters, flooring, windows. Plumbing and electrical. Tile work. Painted everything. They handed me some cash from time to time, but it was all unofficial. When the work was done, they told me they didn't have anything in management. Not even a shift manager. I could be a barista—that was it. I was mad and I walked away.

SANDRA: Well, they were complete crooks. First, there should have been some kind of written agreement for your money. Second, I'm betting you're not a certified electrician or plumber, so none of the work was remotely legal. I don't want to say this, but a sensible person would never have gotten started with people like that.

BEN: Well, I've never been a "sensible" person. I started college, but I dropped out to tour in a rock band. Just minor gigs. Nothing came of it. I still do a little singing with my 6 string. Open mics and like that.

SANDRA: What were you going to major in?

BEN: Psychology. I like to think about people, what they're like, what makes us all different from one another. Just as well I didn't get a degree. I can't stand any kind of job behind a desk. I'm sort of undisciplined. At least I grew up around tools and carpentry, so I make a bit of a living that way. I'm almost 50 now. I was married for a while, but that didn't last. My wife was working hard at her job. I didn't seem to be working much or bringing in any money. The two things just didn't fit, didn't fit from *her* point of view. I have a daughter. All these years I've kept up with her, maintained a *good* relationship. And paid child support, not a lot, but I always had the money for that. She's doing well, very well.

SANDRA: Well, I've been "sensible," all my life, too sensible. I've never been married. I would have liked raising a child. Sometimes I think my life never got started. My career did, but my life didn't. . . . I didn't mean to talk quite this way with you.

BEN: That's OK. I have moments when I think about what's wrong with my life. What I didn't figure out. I have . . . images . . . images in my mind, images that tell me about my life. That capture my life. This is the kind of thing that made me interested in psychology.

SANDRA: I think people do that. Keep memories in their heads that *speak* to them.

BEN: Once, back in Bozeman, I was visiting family. I was driving down a lonely little road, late at night, it was foggy. Suddenly a horse appeared running right ahead of my headlights. He had a rope around his neck, but the rope had broken, and it was dangling on the ground behind him. The horse was totally panicked. If a car had come by in the other direction, who knows, he might have crossed right in front of it. I pulled over, and got out. He didn't run off. I reached for him, but he was afraid and pulled back. I said a lot of calm words. Then the horse let me get closer. He'd pull back, but then he'd let me get a few feet closer than before. He really wanted me to grab the rope. Finally, I *got* the rope. I led the horse off the road, and he followed along. I found a sturdy fence, and I tied him up with a strong knot. The horse was happy. He knew he was done wandering around half-crazy in the dark. He knew someone would get him in the morning . . . I think about that night. It's one of my images. I envy that horse and how he felt when I tied him up. Does this make sense to you?

SANDRA: Let me tell *you* something, and then you can decide whether I understand you. My house has big windows. You saw that. Once, a sparrow got inside. I opened the front door and the big doors to the patio, and I waved my arms at him to get him to fly out. I was trying to move him toward one door, or the other door.

The sparrow flew, tried to get out, but it couldn't find the doors. It kept hitting windows and sort of got stunned. Then it would try again, but it couldn't figure out what a window is, and it would just bang into a window one more time. Finally, it gave up. It just stood there on my coffee table a little hurt and totally baffled. I walked up to it, slowly. It let me put my hands right around it. I lifted the little thing, walked out to the patio, gave it a toss, and it flew to a branch. It looked back at me for quite a while, then it flew off into the sky. In a different world, I might have kept it. *You're* the sparrow in my story, aren't you? Banging around and a little stunned. Except you're not quite ready for the sky.

BEN: I'm very gentle, very loving. I'm a fuck-up, but not in relationships. Except for the money part, I was a good husband.

SANDRA: I think you were.

(Responding to both his own story and SANDRA'S, BEN reaches a high point of emotion and self-revelation.)

BEN: I think I *could* be that horse. Tied safely. I'm ready for that. I think I could be that sparrow, but never let loose, just stay here. Be yours.

(SANDRA sits erect in her chair. Her manner becomes stiffer and more serious.)

SANDRA: Well, we've gotten ahead of ourselves, haven't we.

BEN: Yes, way ahead of ourselves. But we've said it

SANDRA: There's a path here for us. Isn't there?

BEN: I think there is . . . My daughter loves gardens. She'd enjoy all the beautiful things you have planted here. And that Peace Lily I was holding when we met . . . it was going to go on a windowsill in my apartment. But they *will* grow outside. Let's plant it right next to your big shrub.

SANDRA: Maybe . . . but maybe not. It's still a house plant and a bit, delicate. We'll keep it inside, where it will be more . . . protected.

(Blackout.)

THE END