

# **Stones and Rope**

A 10-minute play

by

David K. Farkas

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## **Characters:**

**SINGER:** Anyone who can sing (song from *The Mikado*, by Gilbert & Sullivan)

**GREG :** (*Also offstage voice of Bus Driver*)

Greg is a nerdy, deeply unhappy software engineer in his thirties.

**TERRIE:** Terrie is a whimsical and happily outrageous woman in her thirties. It is never fully clear who she really is and what her motivations are.

**TERRIE'S FATHER:** (Also Narrator and Bystander)

The Father is a straightforward working-class man living in the 1980s.

**DESPONDENT WOMAN and CRAZY WOMAN:**

The Despondent Woman is more educated than Terrie's father.

The Crazy Woman is the crazy woman I met at a bus stop on Bothell Way, near Seattle, who told me that the CIA wanted her to kill her children.

*(Lights.)*

*(The SINGER enters and sings slowly and deliberately to the tune from Gilbert and Sullivan's The Mikado.)*

SINGER:

On a tree by a river a little tom-tit  
Sang "Willow, titwillow, titwillow."  
And I said to him, "Dicky-bird, why do you sit  
Singing 'Willow, titwillow, titwillow'?"  
"Is it weakness of intellect, birdie?" I cried,  
"Or a rather tough worm in your little inside?"  
With a shake of his poor little head, he replied  
"Oh, willow, titwillow, titwillow."

He slapped at his chest, as he sat on that bough  
Singing "Willow, titwillow, titwillow,"  
And a cold perspiration bespangled his brow.  
Oh, willow, titwillow, titwillow.  
He sobbed and he sighed and a gurgle he gave.  
Then he plunged himself into the billowy wave.  
And an echo arose from the suicide's grave  
"Oh, willow, titwillow, titwillow."

*(The SINGER becomes the NARRATOR.)*

NARRATOR: It is about 3:00 AM in a wooded area on the north shore of Lake Washington, near Seattle. Moonlight shines through the scrubby trees. A humming sound can be heard from the nearby wastewater treatment substation.

*(The NARRATOR exits. GREG enters. In a desperate manner, is trying, without much success, to throw a rope tied off with a noose over the branch of a tree. TERRIE enters. She walks with difficulty, placing her weight on a trekking pole that she uses as a cane.)*

TERRIE: You're not doing very well with this. Lack of experience, I guess.

GREG: Get out of here! Go away!

TERRIE: Don't shout at me. I'm here to help.

GREG: I said, "Go!" What kind of help are *you* gonna give me? And what are you doing here? . . . The sewer plant makes a pretty loud noise. *Anyone* could be out here. And . . . (*Looking at her trekking pole but not completing the thought.*)

TERRIE: (*Looking down at her trekking pole and getting his meaning.*) No, I'm not about to sprint away from some attacker. Thanks a lot. But I'll take my chances. Actually I feel safe here. I come often, usually late at night. This place and the late hour—they are special to me. I've met a lot of weird people here, but I've never even been threatened. Anyway I'm offering to *help* you—what are you complaining about? Maybe you need to choose a different branch. (*Looks around.*) Most folks do this at home. You *could* have brought a chair. But, between the two of us, we should be able to get this done.

GREG: What kind of person says they are going to help someone commit suicide?

TERRIE: Well, you know your circumstances. I don't. I figure you must have your reasons.

GREG: I say you're crazy.

TERRIE: Really? Here you are trying to get a noose over a branch, *not* having much success, and you're arguing with someone who just wants to help. *Who* is crazy?

GREG: I'm *not* crazy, but I'm human garbage. I've become shit. Like the stuff they process over there.

TERRIE: Then you should have flushed yourself down a toilet.

GREG: Down a toilet! What's *wrong* with you?

TERRIE: What's wrong with me can't be as bad as what's wrong with you. Let me tell you a story. It never hurts to hear a story, and no story is as important to me as this one.

*(GREG and the TERRIE withdraw to the periphery. Again, it is about 3:00 AM at the same location, but there is no humming sound. The DESPONDENT WOMAN enters. In a confused and desperate state she is looking for fist-sized stones, but is having some difficulty because of the darkness. When she finds one, she stuffs it into one of her pockets. TERRIE'S FATHER enters and briefly watches her.)*

TERRIE'S FATHER: What are you doing?

DESPONDENT WOMAN: (*Looking up.*) I'm looking for stones.

TERRIE'S FATHER: This is a strange time to be collecting stones. And you're sure not looking for anything pretty for your garden. This ain't no beach. There's just darkness and dirt. I think I know why you're here.

DESPONDENT WOMAN: Leave me alone.

TERRIE'S FATHER: No, I can't do that. *(Approaching more closely.)* You are not going to walk into the lake with all those stones in your pockets. I won't let it happen.

DESPONDENT WOMAN: You can stop me tonight. But you can't really stop me. There will be other nights, other ways.

TERRIE'S FATHER: You don't need to do this.

DESPONDENT WOMAN: What do you know? I *do* need to do this. My life is nothing. Except pain and misery. I'm best out of this world.

TERRIE'S FATHER: OK, your life is worth nothing. Nothing to you anyway. But you are still a human being. You can *do* things. You can help people. *(Pauses.)* You could even help me.

DESPONDENT WOMAN: Help *you*?

TERRIE'S FATHER: Yes, I'm raising my young daughter—alone. Her mother is dead. The girl is crippled. I was driving. *I'd* like to end *my* life. But I can't. I'm needed. And it's more than I can do by myself. If your life is worth nothing to you, give it to me, to my girl. Whatever happens can't be worse than what you're trying to do now. Come back with me. Try it. If it doesn't work out, you can always finish what you started tonight.

*(He reaches toward her entreatingly. She takes his hand and follows him silently. The humming resumes. TERRIE steps forward a few steps with GREG by her side.)*

TERRIE: They raised me. They never married. They never spent a night in the same bed. I don't know why. But they took care of each other, and they loved me. So, you see, I know a little about what's going on with you tonight. When I walk in these woods, I feel close to two people who did everything they could for me. Think of yourself as an organ donor. You're done with your life—or you think you are. But the body parts can be used. In your case, we'll leave them *inside*. Currently, I have no need of a kidney or a heart or a cornea. But the whole package, intact and working . . . And not unattractive. *(Suggestively.)* I think I could use that. We could find out. I don't exactly have my choice of men. Is this plan any worse than what you were trying to do?

*(GREG nods in acknowledgment, puzzled and uncertain but hopeful.)*

TERRIE: Let's get out of here. The trail is over there.

*GREG follows TERRIE along the trail. A park bench (or some approximation) is brought in. TERRIE and GREG return. They seat themselves. They have the rope with them. The humming can no longer be heard.*

TERRIE: Twenty Questions: You tried to hang yourself because . . . It was a tragic romance. You were madly in love with a beautiful young woman and . . .

GREG: *(Irritated.)* No.

TERRIE: You did some terrible secret deed. You poisoned your dear old dad, and now you're wracked with guilt.

GREG: No!

*(GREG stands, annoyed and agitated. It appears that he might walk away.)*

TERRIE: Hold on there. I'm not finished . . . You've been out of work. You've borrowed from all your friends. But they're all broke too. Or maybe you don't have any friends. There's no one to lend you a dollar, and you're a libertarian and you won't accept help from the government.

GREG: No! I have a job. I have money. And I have friends, work friends at least.

TERRIE: "You have money." *(Looks him over top to bottom.)* Then you should *look* a little better than you do. What's your job?

GREG: I write software. Server software.

TERRIE: Well, there's your trouble. I'd hang myself too if I spent my days writing server software.

GREG: I like writing software.

TERRIE: My God! So much the worse. I don't think your problem is fixable. Here, take back the rope.

GREG: OK. You *are* crazy. Actually, that's OK. But, let's stop doing this. There isn't "a reason." What do you do—for work I mean.

TERRIE: I work at lots of things. I work until I'm bored or until I'm fired. And I *do* get bored, and so I *do* get fired. Sometimes I just get laid off. Like, "We're sorry. It's not about you, but. . ." Right now I'm at Jay's, but I think they're gonna let me go.

GREG: This doesn't seem to bother you.

TERRIE: Well, I'm not in possession of a rope. My kitchen knives don't get nervous when I open the drawer, and the pills in my medicine cabinet are pretty ordinary.

GREG: So you float through life on a golden bubble.

TERRIE: I didn't say *that*. For one thing, I limp through life. But in one way you're right. My spirit seems to ride on a whole lot of bubbles. I'd be better on just one. And maybe I'd float but be tethered to something.

*(She looks closely at GREG, but he doesn't seem to catch her meaning. He rejoins her on the bench. They sit silently for a while.)*

GREG: I can say this. It was a pattern—small refusals, small betrayals. There was someone I didn't "need" to help. I wasn't "obligated," so I didn't. But inside I took a hit. And someone else. And so, another hit. And something else happened and another hit. Until I sank, so to speak. Or I decomposed, rotted away from the inside out. Something. But I wasn't human anymore, and I knew it. I couldn't escape it.

TERRIE: You can "earn" your way back into being a real person. If you'd hung yourself, you'd leave with the debt unpaid. The Universe keeps its accounts and doesn't like deadbeats. But it does accept late payments.

GREG: You have a degree in Cosmic Accounting?

TERRIE: I know the Cosmos wants to pull people back, and when the job falls to me, I snap into action. I'll probably never give an employer a full week of good work, but the Cosmos puts me to work and likes the results.

GREG: Well, I guess we're done with Twenty Questions. What's your name?

TERRIE: Terrie. "Theodora"—It means "gift from God." Which god is an open question. What's your name?

GREG: Gregory, "Greg"—it doesn't mean anything.

TERRIE: *(Treating his name like an unfamiliar sound.)* "Greg-ah-reeh." Maybe it means "organ donor," in the language of some world we don't know about. Maybe it means "fully *intact*, organ donor."

GREG: You said I'm not the only one you've "pulled back."

TERRIE: I'll tell you another story. I'm in this one.

*(TERRIE and GREG stand and exit, as actors. The bench is removed. It's full daylight. We hear traffic noise, then the squeal of brakes, and finally the sound of an impact (perhaps produced by the actor playing GREG). The CRAZY WOMAN hits the stage floor with the sound of the impact. The appearance of the CRAZY WOMAN should be sufficiently different in some way from that of the DESPONDENT WOMAN so that the audience immediately recognizes that the CRAZY WOMAN is a different person.)*

*(The BYSTANDER enters and calls for help on his cell phone.)*

BYSTANDER: *(To 911.)* We need help here! . . . Yes, an automobile accident.

*(Pantomimes further dialog with 911.)*

OFF-STAGE VOICE OF THE BUS DRIVER: There was nothing I could do. The woman jumped right off the curb. She did it on purpose. Who here saw this? I need to get statements.

BYSTANDER: *(To 911.)* Yes, quickly. Bothell Way and 61<sup>st</sup> Avenue. Into the city. Southbound. Yes, yes, I can do that. Yes. Yes. Thank you.

*(TERRIE enters and looks down at the CRAZY WOMAN.)*

TERRIE: Total failure of the imagination.

CRAZY WOMAN: What? What do you mean? Help me.

BYSTANDER: *(Reaching down to the CRAZY WOMAN.)* I called 911. An ambulance is coming.

*(The BYSTANDER begins to kneel by the CRAZY WOMAN, but TERRIE puts her arm in the way.)*

TERRIE: *(To the BYSTANDER and secondarily to the CRAZY WOMAN.)* I have specialized training. I can manage things until the EMTs come.

BYSTANDER: OK. I'll keep people from crowding you.

CRAZY WOMAN: Oh, God. My leg. Someone help me.

TERRIE: I *am* helping you. I'm helping you in ways that the EMTs can't. When you "throw yourself under a bus," don't do it at a bus stop. You're going to have to try this again. And unless you're real lucky, you'll be walking like I do.

CRAZY WOMAN: I think you're a nut case.

TERRIE: Who's a nut case will soon become clear. But this much I can tell you now. If and when I decide to end *my* life, I won't make such a mess of it.

*(The BYSTANDER is agitated. He is walking around looking for the ambulance, shooing people away, and occasionally checking on the CRAZY WOMAN.)*

BYSTANDER: *(To CRAZY WOMAN.)* It won't be long now. You're gonna be OK.

*(The CRAZY WOMAN acknowledges him, but TERRIE draws the CRAZY WOMAN'S attention to herself. The BYSTANDER exits.)*

TERRIE: So, what made you do it?

*(The CRAZY WOMAN does not respond.)*

TERRIE: I *know* why you did it. I want to hear *you say* it. Why did you try to get run over by the bus?

CRAZY WOMAN: The CIA put an antenna in my brain. They want me to kill my children. I hear it every day. I can't get it to stop. They're taking over. I have to protect my children.

TERRIE: The CIA does this a lot. Go look on the Internet. Folks know about this. It may be a Donald Trump thing. But, here's what matters: No one *cares* what the CIA says anymore. The CIA talks into people's brains, but people ignore the voices. When they are talking to you, they can *hear* you. So just tell them to screw themselves. I can help with that.

*The CRAZY WOMAN looks quizzical. TERRIE and the CRAZY WOMAN stand up, as actors rather than characters, and exit. The bench is brought on. Terrie and GREG return and assume exactly their previous positions on the bench.*

TERRIE: We're friends now. She's doing OK. We take walks together. We're quite a sight, both limping along . . . I can tell you more stories.

GREG: Please don't. Not now. My brain is spinning. I think I'm losing it.

TERRIE: I understand. Who would expect otherwise.

GREG: I think you are very . . . special.

TERRIE: I may be very special. I may just be crazy, like you said before. But the circumstances in which we met can never be duplicated, so I will always be very special to *you*.

GREG: *(Standing.)* We should go someplace. Something must be open.

TERRIE: There's always Denny's—open 24 hours. But Denny's at 4:00 AM . . . You see some *really* desperate people there. Those are my people, but you're not ready for Denny's at 4:00 AM.

GREG: Then let's go to my place. We'll figure things out. We'll *start* to figure things out.

TERRIE: Yes, that would be very good. I like you, Gregory. We can help each other. I am your gift from God, and you are my organ donor, intact and functioning. Internally and, I presume . . . (*smiling, suggestively*) externally as well.

*(GREG looks surprised and does a double take. Then smiles back. TERRIE now stands, and they exit walking closely together. The SINGER enters.)*

SINGER: *(Slowly and deliberately.)*

As you slide off this world from the mess that you've made.

Willow, titwillow, titwillow.

Be it rope, stones, or pills. Be it bullet or blade.

Oh willow, titwillow, titwillow.

You will hear a stern voice saying, "You have not learned

That those internal organs, were no gifts—they are *earned*,

When worn through with Love's work, they are finally returned."

Willow, titwillow, titwillow.