

# SIX AUTUMNS ON THE HUDSON

by Laurel Andersen

## CHARACTERS

- Susie M. Barstow** (20s-60s) she/her; painter of the Hudson School. Brash, adventurous, covers insecurity and restlessness with bravado; outdoorsy; athletic; imaginative. A prolific artist.
- Edith Wilkinson Cook** (20s-60s) she/her; painter of the Hudson School. Introspective, empathetic, deeply loving; shy outside of her relationship with Susie; gentle, but ultimately not without backbone.

## STAGE DIRECTIONS TO BE READ ARE **HIGHLIGHTED**

*While the play is inspired by two real women and their friendship, this is a work of historical fiction, and some creative license has been taken.*

## NOTES ON CASTING

- We see these women age throughout the play. The age of the actors cast is flexible. What matters is that each actor can embody the spirit of each stage of life, not necessarily a literal depiction.

## SETTING

A series of Autumns from 1858 - 1902.

Largely, a stretch of water on the Hudson River between Beacon, NY and Pollepel (Bannerman) Island. Briefly, the Beacon NY dock, and Pollepel Island itself.

## SCENE BREAKDOWN

- |                      |                 |                                |                        |
|----------------------|-----------------|--------------------------------|------------------------|
| • <b>Scene 1</b>     | 1873            | Beacon, NY Dock                | Susie and Edith are 37 |
| • <b>Interlude A</b> | Outside of time |                                |                        |
| • <b>Scene 2</b>     | 1858            | The River                      | Susie and Edith are 22 |
| • <b>Interlude B</b> | Outside of time |                                |                        |
| • <b>Scene 3</b>     | 1875            | The River                      | Susie and Edith are 39 |
| • <b>Interlude C</b> | Outside of time |                                |                        |
| • <b>Scene 4</b>     | 1881            | The River                      | Susie and Edith are 45 |
| • <b>Interlude D</b> | Outside of time |                                |                        |
| • <b>Scene 5</b>     | 1892            | The River                      | Susie and Edith are 56 |
| • <b>Interlude E</b> | Outside of time |                                |                        |
| • <b>Scene 6</b>     | 1902            | Pollepel<br>(Bannerman) Island | Susie is 66            |

**SCENE I**

*(Beacon, NY Dock. Autumn 1873. SUSIE, EDITH, and a canoe. SUSIE and EDITH are thirty-seven. With the air of tradition:)*

(*bowing, gallantly*) Miss Cook. SUSIE

(*curtseying*) Miss Barstow. EDITH

Are you ready? SUSIE

As ready as I ever am. EDITH

After all these years, I'd have thought you'd be accustomed to adventure. SUSIE

I could never grow accustomed to doing anything with you. EDITH

We're not too old for this, are we? SUSIE

Certainly not! Careful, or you'll start to sound like me. EDITH

Shall we cast off? SUSIE

Wait, my skirt -- EDITH

Blast your skirt! The day awaits! SUSIE

I'm not as comfortable flaunting my calves as you continue to be, in defiance of polite society as we know it -- EDITH

Oh yes, I'm sure the fish will be scandalized. (*before EDITH can cut in:*) THREE! TWO! ONE! SUSIE

EDITH AND SUSIE

Hello, Hudson!

*(They heave their canoe into the water, and climb in.  
A brief rush of water -- then, silence. The light changes --)*

**INTERLUDE A**

How did we meet, you might ask?	SUSIE
...Would you believe that I don't remember?	EDITH
Some class --	SUSIE
Or gathering --	EDITH
A rare moment of social exertion --	SUSIE
What's important is we met.	EDITH
And it seemed as if we'd known each other our entire lives.	SUSIE
I was in awe of her.	EDITH
I was so intrigued by her.	SUSIE
She was so bold.	EDITH
She was so brilliant.	SUSIE
I so wanted to be just like her.	EDITH
I'd found a kindred spirit.	SUSIE
We started hiking together, finding spots to paint outside the city.	EDITH

SUSIE

But that first canoe trip cemented it.

EDITH

This would be a lifelong friendship.

*(Sound of rushing water -- The current changes, SHARP --  
Light change --)*

## **SCENE II**

*(On the river. Autumn 1858. SUSIE and EDITH are  
twenty-two.)*

SUSIE

Here we go!  
*(rowing vigorously)* Put your back into it!

EDITH

Susie, I'm trying!

SUSIE

City girl!

EDITH

You're from Brooklyn!

SUSIE

Is there anything better for the spirit than adrenaline?

EDITH

Lemon cake?

SUSIE

Lemon cake doesn't transform you into a divine instrument of motion! It doesn't ignite fire in your blood!

EDITH

It tastes good.

SUSIE

Sugar and butter and fat. It puts one to sleep. Don't you want to be AWAKE? To exert your muscles is to know yourself as a living being. Listen to the music of your body working!

*They row. EDITH grunts and pants.*

EDITH

*(laboriously)* I...don't feel...very musical...

SUSIE

Edith, we're so close to Achievement.

EDITH

We're almost to the Island?

SUSIE

No, we're almost past this rough patch. We still have a considerable stretch of water ahead.

EDITH

Why on earth did I agree to this trip?

SUSIE

Because you want to be a work of art in motion.

EDITH

What about a pleasant hike? You've been known to enjoy a hike! I should know -- I was there!

SUSIE

"PLEASANT!" What's enjoyable about "PLEASANT?"

EDITH

I'm a lover of nature, Susie, not an athlete!

SUSIE

Yes! You love nature! And you agreed to this trip because you know *I* know the thrill of STRIVING --

and when you're with me, we seek!

We discover!

We go boldly forth toward brave, exquisite peaks,  
the beauty of this breathing world blooming under our skin!

You came to the river with me to not merely see, but FEEL

the...thrill...

the climax of...

AN OBSTACLE SURPASSED!

*(They crest the wave. The water calms around them, but the gentle sound of the river continues underneath.)*

EDITH

I'm a mess!

SUSIE

Sweat is a badge of honor! But if you're uncomfortable...here!

*(SUSIE leans over the side, splashes water on her face. EDITH holds tight to the sides of the canoe.)*

Careful!

EDITH

(*laughing*) Can't you swim?

SUSIE

I'm not exactly dressed for a swim -- and neither are you, Rational Dress notwithstanding!

EDITH

It will catch on.

SUSIE

Swimming?

EDITH

Rational Dress.

SUSIE

Oh.

EDITH

That's why it's called *Rational* Dress. Because it makes sense. It's only a matter of time. And so -- will -- our -- art!

SUSIE

Perhaps.

EDITH

We were put on this earth to enact Great Achievements, Edith. Don't second guess yourself!

SUSIE

(*as if toasting*) To Great Achievements then -- sooner rather than later!

EDITH

Don't tease me with a toast when we have nothing left to drink!

SUSIE

How about...THIS?!

EDITH

*(EDITH splashes SUSIE. SUSIE shrieks.)*

SUSIE

Witch!!

*(A splash-fight ensues. Sound of the water silences -- light change--)*

**INTERLUDE B**

SUSIE

I wasn't an artist who could work under any old circumstances. Conditions needed to be just right. Edith painted whatever was there. She could find something worthwhile to capture in almost anything. Weeds and rot. Dark and drear and all of it. I couldn't be satisfied with mundanity. And if that meant that I needed to enhance a bit -- well.

I never wholly invented anything I painted, you know. My imagination wasn't *that* evolved. But I had an excellent memory for color -- and for light. And, even on a beautiful day like-- this--

*(The sound of water, again --)*

if the light wasn't quite right -- I could remember the way the sky looked, some other year. And if I kept a steady hand, I could guide that memory onto the page.

*(The light slowly changes as we continue to transition, with SUSIE, into Scene III.)*

I have no patience for imperfections. Imperfection doesn't make History. Every new place I go is a Quest. I'm searching for that perfectly beautiful view that needs no enhancing.

I have an instinct for these things. And my instinct keeps pointing me towards the Island. There's something there, something I'll see there, if I time it just right --

**SCENE III**

*(Lights all the way up. On the river. Autumn 1875. SUSIE and EDITH are 39.)*

SUSIE

Oh, did I tell you? I'm to be exhibited.

EDITH

How exciting! Where? When?

SUSIE

Here and there. I'll write to you about it, if you like, but..I'm not going.

EDITH

What?

SUSIE

I've decided to let it be. The work will speak for itself. I would merely get in the way. Besides, there's so much more to be done. Complacency is Death to an artist. One must Keep Going. Talking of -- we're losing the light, come on!

*(The sound of rushing water gets louder and louder. SUSIE and*

*EDITH row, and row, and row -- EDITH stops. Sound of the water cuts out, and lights change for:)*

**INTERLUDE C**

EDITH

I was angry with her, and I didn't know why.  
 And then I realized that, without knowing, I was working so, so hard to *forgive* her  
 for her success.  
 Or maybe, truly --  
 for the genuine contentment she found in solitude.

I couldn't comprehend it.  
 My loneliness was staggering,  
 only truly assuaged by the presence of others.  
 Even if it was trifling,  
 even if it was small,  
 even if the people were irritating and dull,  
 even if it was unspeakably unpleasant to listen to what they had to say --  
 I still felt better when someone else was there with me.  
 I need to be around other people. Real people.

I would dream of a warm mass of bodies.  
 Flushed, smiling faces.  
 Laughter. Embraces.  
 The pulse of a group.  
 A collective heartbeat,  
 driving forward,  
 forward,  
 surrounded on all sides,  
*safe* on all sides--

and I'd woke up in cool sheets, dry.  
 My mouth -- dry,  
 my skin --  
 and my bed was too wide, too flat, too big, too --  
 and I'd close my eyes and try to will myself back to sleep,  
 but the dream would slip away,  
 giant swathes of it disappearing, blank, into grainy white --  
 bleached over --  
 and the more I'd try to fight my way back inside, the more white space I'd see,  
 until the bright of that echoing, empty white proved unbearable,  
 and I couldn't --  
 I couldn't. I --

Unlike Susie, I couldn't live inside my imagination.  
 I wasn't good at make-believe friends, or fairy tales.  
 And she was so good at People. But she *chose* to turn away.

She had it. She found it: a way to connect with people, a way to be a part of a community that adored her, and she didn't want it. As long as her Art was famous -- she didn't need to be.

*(Rushing water, as EDITH transitions into present-tense.)*

*(to SUSIE:)* You don't need to be a part of it. You don't need to be There. How can that be? Sometimes -- I think all I want is the people, and the paintings are merely --

**SCENE IV**

*(Light change. On the river. Autumn 1881. SUSIE and EDITH are 45.)*

SUSIE

You don't want your work to be remembered?

EDITH

I'd trade remembrance for conversation.

SUSIE

"Conversation" dies as soon as the words have left your mouth. It's fleeting. Feeble. And I don't live inside my imagination. Not here.

EDITH

Maybe not. But you smile when you're asleep, don't you? I think even when I'm there -- in the good place, in the dream-- some part of me -- is dreading waking up.

SUSIE

Oh. Hmm.

*(Beat.)*

EDITH

Well -- Enough of that. I might have an idea. If you're up to something different, this year?

SUSIE

I'm listening.

EDITH

I read about a pair of artists who painted each other.

*(Beat.)*

Don't you think it's a novel idea? I'm terrified by the idea of a self-portrait -- spending all that time with my own face -- but I'd certainly trust you with my likeness. And I'd enjoy -- ah -- painting you. Very much.

SUSIE  
Have you ever done a portrait?

EDITH  
No. But I think it would be a lovely challenge.

SUSIE  
...I don't think so.

EDITH  
Why not?

SUSIE  
I don't care for portraits.

EDITH  
...as a rule?

SUSIE  
Maybe on commission. If one needs the money. Otherwise...why expend the time and labour when there is so much inspiration to be found elsewhere? Look at this marvellous day!

EDITH  
...is it that you don't want to paint any portrait, or that you don't want to paint mine?

SUSIE  
No, no, that's not it. This is...new. Let me think about it? Next Autumn, perhaps?

EDITH  
Fine. Fine.

SUSIE  
Edith, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you --

EDITH  
It's fine. I hope we're almost to the Island. I wouldn't want to *waste* such a lovely day to paint.

#### **INTERLUDE D**

*(Sound of the water cuts out. SUSIE and EDITH, each in a separate pool of light.)*

SUSIE  
What are you, once you stop making art? Are you still a painter if you no longer paint? Or are you merely -- "One who has painted?" "One who, at one time, indulged in a bit of painting?" It's a privilege to be satisfied with the work you've Done. I can't stop. Or every teacher, every curator, who looked at me and saw a hobbyist will be right.

EDITH

I didn't join Susie on the Autumn canoe trip --or any trip -- for years, after that. I girded my loins and set out into the wide world of the city and sought other companionship. Other Lady Artists.

But while I admired their work --

without jealousy, even as I picked up my brush with less and less frequency --  
and enjoyed their company,

Their easy laughter, their stories --

The pauses they left for me to fill --

That incredible, inquisitive silence,

That unexpectedly-*welcome* white space,

So new, so sweet --

Through it all, I missed my first friend. The woman I had admired so fiercely for so long.

The person who taught me to reach beyond what I thought was possible.

So I pushed off once again into the ever-changing current, hoping not to be swept away --

*(Sound of the rushing river returns -- light change --)*

**SCENE V**

*On the river. Autumn, 1892. SUSIE and EDITH are fifty-six.*

EDITH

The island feels father away every year.

SUSIE

That's what you always say.

EDITH

Can we stop, just for a moment?

SUSIE

If we stop now, we won't make it before sunset.

EDITH

Would that be so bad?

SUSIE

There's never enough time to paint.

EDITH

I don't need to paint.

SUSIE

Well, fine, *you* don't need to, I know you've stopped -- for whatever reason -- but I thought perhaps this year, I could finally--

EDITH

It's always about what you want, isn't it? Well, I want to be more than an accessory on your adventure. Sometimes I feel so alone, even when you're here. I want to initiate.

SUSIE

Don't you?

EDITH

No, I acquiesce. I get used to things, I talk myself into them, I pretend like I wanted this from the beginning, because you're having so much fun, and I never wanted to dampen your mood -- I never wanted you to reject me. But if we could stand still, only for a *moment*--  
You're always looking at the horizon. Why can't you look at me?

SUSIE

I'm a landscape painter.

EDITH

So am I!

SUSIE

Are you, still? Or *were* you?

EDITH

Don't be cruel.

SUSIE

I need momentum to create. If I stop, then what if I stop -- making --

EDITH

Must you always be making? Can't you be with me? If I'm not an appropriate subject for a painting--

SUSIE

Not this again --

EDITH

Can't I be the subject of your gaze, your attention? Can't you just look at me and have nothing else come of it but the looking itself?

SUSIE

What am I doing now?

EDITH

You're looking straight through me. We're getting older.

EDITH (CONTD)

Stop rowing. Stop. What if our Great Achievement is spending a beautiful Autumn day together?

SUSIE

I don't know if I can--

EDITH

Try. Try for -- ten seconds. Ten seconds of just being here, and looking at me.

*(SUSIE looks at her. Breathes. Sighs. Fidgets. After a few beats:)*

EDITH

You really can't do it. After all these years-- I'm not enough for you.

SUSIE

You're my best friend.

EDITH

But I'm not enough. Not even for a moment. Not enough.

*(A bump -- they've hit the shoreline. SUSIE climbs out of the canoe, tethers it to a post. EDITH doesn't get up. The sound of the river cuts out -- EDITH in spotlight, unseen by SUSIE: )*

### **INTERLUDE F**

EDITH

You work so hard to get somewhere. Why not stay for a while?

*(As the sound of the water gradually comes back in, lights dim on EDITH and come up on SUSIE, standing on: )*

### **SCENE VI**

*Pollopel (or Bannerman) Island. Autumn 1902. SUSIE is sixty-six. EDITH watches SUSIE from the canoe, still unseen.*

SUSIE

The island already feels different. A Mr. Bannerman is building something here -- a castle? I can't have heard him right.

Well, anyhow, here I am. The world is shrinking, but here I am.

Why go through so much trouble to escape the city, year after year?

You were right, to a degree. The solitude was appealing. In the woods, on the river, one can be alone in a way that's impossible at home.

## SUSIE (CONTD)

But -- you are never truly alone, out here. Not really.  
 Because everything around you is alive.  
 In the city, if you're alone in a room,  
 you're surrounded by dead things  
 or, worse, things that never had lived at all.  
 Stone and brick, concrete and plaster.  
 Solitude is stiff and silent and utterly, utterly still.  
 Here--motion and sound!  
 Just listen to the river.

*(The sound of rushing water swells, and recedes.)*

You can hear it move --  
 wild, and constant --  
 I can hear it,  
*feel* its motion echoed in my blood.

In these parts of the world we haven't yet smothered with never-alive things, everything is breathing. Moving. At different speeds, perhaps -- but there is motion. We can't see a tree growing, but it does. Or -- we do see it. Every time we look. If we look. We measure its progress. Slowly.

You knew how to take your time. You knew how to wait.

I was always so impatient. Run, move, go, go, go, start sketching, rip it up, start again, put it to the side, on to the next, on to the next, on to the next! Nothing good enough, nothing important enough, *big* enough --

I painted landscapes because I was interested in *big* things, *big* ideas. The harmony of seemingly-disparate, incompatible elements convening -- working together, in thousands of combinations, to keep the world turning. Capturing a landscape requires one to step back. Regard the beauty of the Whole. By comparison, portraits seemed prosaic. Limiting. "What could possibly be divined," I thought, "from gazing at one human being that cannot be found within a natural vista tenfold?"

But I was wrong. And you knew it.  
 You knew that there is a limitless universe inside of each and every human soul.  
 You knew how many beautiful, disparate, changing parts a human heart contained.  
 You knew the harmony within a person, if seen, if truly seen and understood, could drown out all the other beautiful things in this world.

And you never painted a single portrait.  
 You didn't need to capture, didn't need to prove.

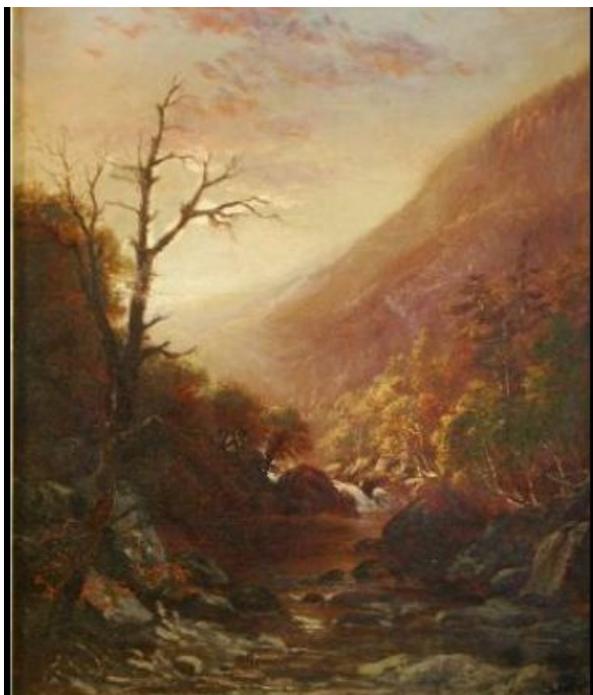
## SUSIE (CONTD)

You Saw.  
 That was enough.  
 And now I see, too.  
 Because you're gone.  
 And this wide, wide world feels so much smaller without you.

*(The sound of rushing water grows louder. EDITH leans out of the canoe -- dips her fingers in the water. She gets out of the boat and steps into the river. SUSIE turns. Sees EDITH. Waves a hand in greeting -- or smiles. EDITH turns and walks away, deep into the river. SUSIE watches her go. Sound of the water swells, perhaps accompanied by music -- Blackout.)*

**END OF PLAY**Autumnal Paintings by:

SUSIE M BARSTOW:



EDITH WILKINSON COOK:



51-1875), *Autumn Landscape with Figures*, 1871, Oil on canvas, 7