

GOING UP

A Ten-Minute Play

CHARACTERS

ADRIAN A man, older than Bill, age forty to sixty. Wears a watch and sunshades.

BILL A man, a half-generation younger than Adrian.

SETTING

Either a promontory or the top of a butte, surrounded by a rising sea. The sea is entirely covered up by a thick layer of garbage, most of it consisting of plastic detritus and tangled fishing nets. The promontory is divided between Adrian's and Bill's sides. With the exception of a battered deckchair, Adrian's side is mostly bare. In contrast, Bill's side is densely cluttered with junk fished out from the sea, but the clutter is organized into sorted piles. On top of the butte, a flag – a large white plastic bag attached to a stick casually thrust into the ground. At the start of the play, Adrian is leaning over the edge of the water. Bill is sitting on a rock, sewing pieces of tarp into a sail, using a large hand-fashioned needle and colorful nylon thread. Everything he's using has been reclaimed from the trash that fills the surrounding ocean. (In a minimal setting, Bill's quarters need not be shown – they're presumed out of sight beyond Adrian's quarters. The sea is to be imagined reaching up toward the edge of the stage.)

TIME

Sometime soon.

SCENE 1

(ADRIAN is leaning over the edge of the water. BILL is sitting on a rock, sewing pieces of tarp into a sail, using a large hand-fashioned needle and colorful nylon thread.)

ADRIAN

It's rising.

BILL

No kidding! The sea's rising? And they say no news is good news.

ADRIAN

Two more inches since sunset yesterday. At that rate...

BILL

...we haven't got much time. Yeah. Our daily conversation. Better talk than do something. Must be your motto.

ADRIAN

(Peering down.)

If only we could see the water. How many feet thick do you think this junk is? Six? Ten? Once upon a time, there was such a thing as diving. Now there's no way to get through that filth.

BILL

Yeah, lucky you who had the leisure to dive.

ADRIAN

Don't fault me if you didn't. Anyone next to a body of water can dive. Provided it really is water.

BILL

Well, I didn't.

ADRIAN

Let's not squabble, shall we? This is no time to be petty! Here we are, at the top of our world, what remains of it... and for how long shall we be kings of the heap, huh? Lording it over the leftovers!

BILL

Do you believe there are others... other survivors like us, out there?

ADRIAN

Sure... but why keep asking? It's like surmising potential intelligent life in other corners of the universe. What good is it to us, huh?

(A PAUSE)

Still, a few female survivors... somewhere... a warm thought to entertain... Or does it make things worse? You never know whether picturing what you pine for will assuage need or depress the hell out of you. Sometimes it does both, have you noticed?... Oh don't look surly. I thought you longed for some feminine presence too...

BILL

Maybe I do. So what?

ADRIAN

So cheer up!

(A BRIEF PAUSE)

What?

BILL

You just... you don't... Never mind.

ADRIAN

And music, have you noticed how that too is missing. No trees to catch the wind, the sound of waves smothered by debris. Look at all this, and not a single piano among the lot!

BILL

(Stops sewing to give this some thought.)

Possibly we might find a mouth harp.

ADRIAN

If you do, I'll play it in retribution.

BILL

There's really no satisfying you, is there?

ADRIAN

Joke! That was a joke. As were you, I hope, joking...

(A SILENCE.

ADRIAN turns around and trips on something.)

Damn, the garbage in the water is not enough for you, uh? You gotta bring more of it where we stand! Think we've got too much space up here?

(ADRIAN kicks what he tripped on.)

I insist that my spot stay free of rubbish! Where I sleep, where I sit, where I eat, in a word, my living quarters! That's off limits. I want it blank, pristine, minimalist! Let's keep some sense of the aesthetics here.

BILL

You were happy enough when I found you a bottle of suntan lotion almost full!

ADRIAN

Sunscreen. Even in our predicament there's no need to age prematurely... I shall dedicate my young skin to you.

BILL

Ha! And the sardines, a whole unopened can! Because how else are we going to find sardines? Fresh-caught at the end of your nylon string?

ADRIAN

Fishing rod!

BILL

Yeah, well, and what have you got to dip it into, your *fishing rod*? A sea of plastics?

ADRIAN

That's why I don't use a fishnet – even though we've got enough netting tangling about in the plastic soup to bag us a whole planet.

BILL

(Not listening.)

I'll remind you the only pristine water we've got, since you like pristine, is thanks to the containers I've fished out, that now collect what monsieur drinks. And the raft... the raft that just might save our lives, me again building it! So who's doing the work around here? You just sit around, acting like it's a holiday...

ADRIAN

Just because you see style, you imagine there's no substance!

BILL

All you ever do is lounge!

ADRIAN

Making decisions is hard work.

BILL

What decisions? There are no decisions to be made any more. The decisions have been made! It's over... And if you really were one of them making decisions, I wouldn't boast about it. You don't like the result much yourself, do you?

ADRIAN

Wait a minute here, no need to mix everything up. *That* result is the effect of collective decisions, do you hear? Collective! Even you had a part...

BILL

Me? I've just been doing my bit all along!

ADRIAN

Exactly! Your bit has been just as instrumental, perhaps more, than mine. Everything's market driven, you know as well as I do. And you... are the market!

BILL

What's that supposed to mean?

ADRIAN

You consume! Look at all this, look at all the crap you collect, even here, on the last bit of proper dirt we've got left for... how long... days... just days... because the sea's rising, and by the way, my friend, that's one of the things I do here, measure! Keep track of the rising ocean! Which rises every day a bit faster...! So here we are, surrounded by trash, and what should you do but collect more, hunt daily for a bit of treasure, find the bargain of the hour among the refuse, oh the satisfaction, how you clean each bit, polish it, add it to your collection, pile it, stack it, heap it, hoard it, distribute it all around until it squeezes you out of your living space faster even than the rising sea!... May I point out that when it comes to living rather than puttering, or should I say messing around, you come to *my* quarters? Can't stand your own clutter, can you? Of course, you're always welcome in my litter-free abode...

BILL

My clutter is organized. I sort things out.

ADRIAN

I noticed. By kind and color both!

BILL

And if it can be put to use, it's not wasted... What do you think the raft is made of?

ADRIAN

Ah yes, a model consumer, I'll grant that. You're the man who rescued a garbage can, and uses it! You even sort things out for *recycling* for Christ's sake, here we are, encircled by detritus and you have dedicated recycling piles! Why, you think your piles got a *future*? Or are you hoping for redemption?

BILL

Oh so it's better to toss things over your shoulder the way you do? Let it fall wherever, litter with nonchalance?

ADRIAN

(With hauteur.)

As the consummate consumer, *you* are the market force that created all this... I merely did your bidding.

BILL

And now you're spewing muck to add to the mix?

ADRIAN

Bah, our new Noah! Like you, when the sea rose, Noah built a raft. Like you, he was a collector though he preferred animals to things and limited himself to one pair of each. But you, poor latter-day Noah, only one living species to your credit and not even in a configuration that can reproduce. Trash and a pair of useless men... How will you keep the species going, Noah?

BILL

Let's see you find the living things, I'll get them on board!

ADRIAN

(Looking at his watch.)

Wait! It's time!

(ADRIAN goes and gets the flag – a plastic bag attached to a stick – and waves it madly.)

No, false alarm. As expected.

BILL

(Sarcastic but can't help looking up himself.)

You're still hoping for rescue? A miracle? On the dot of the hour?

ADRIAN

No. I believe in the value of ritual... or hope as mental hygiene... It gives me something to do. A pretext for a bit of calisthenics...

BILL

Then why are you still holding on to your phone?

ADRIAN

It contains all my data...

BILL

Lost, gone, if you can't plug it in. The sky is silent. The satellites no longer shine at night.

(A SILENCE)

ADRIAN

Shall I tell the ocean how much to rise by every day? I hear a sense of control is essential to well-being.

BILL

Well, maybe I'll go over to my side and work on the raft.

(Not moving.)

ADRIAN

Ah, the raft... the beautiful plastic raft!

BILL

Well, it *is* beautiful. Even if it's made from bits and pieces of... even if it came from *that*...

(Nods toward the garbage that covers the water)

In fact, I thought... I wanted... when the raft was done... if there was time left... with some of the stuff I've collected... you could do interesting things... beautiful things even... I think... maybe... I'd like to try anyway... If there was time...

ADRIAN

Mm... Decorative trinkets out of bottle caps and action figures, syringes and straws, plastic forks and tampon applicators, foam cups and golf balls, and the occasional doll's head?

BILL

No!

ADRIAN

(Enthusiastic.)

Actually brilliant, brilliant! This is precisely what this landscape needs for completion. The addition of kitsch! Yes. You have my full support. I'm delighted!

BILL

Go to hell!

ADRIAN

(Genuinely surprised.)

Why? I mean it!

BILL

Why do you have to destroy... put down... I... I...

ADRIAN

(Looking at BILL intently.)

Ah... You really want beauty out of garbage... Don't think redeeming the stuff will save you. It won't change *this* reality...

(A PAUSE)

Or ours.

BILL

That's not the point.

ADRIAN

Oh no?

(A LONG SILENCE)

ADRIAN

Well, let's go take a look at the raft, shall we? Maybe I'll hand you the screws.

(BILL looks at ADRIAN.)

ADRIAN

What?

BILL

There are no... Never mind.

(A LONG SILENCE)

(BILL begins to sing softly, then as the song progresses, the singing gets louder and louder.)

BILL

THERE WAS ONCE A LITTLE BOAT
WHICH HAD NEVER BEEN AFLOAT

(ADRIAN joins in)

AHOY! AHOY!

ADRIAN

IT UNDERTOOK A LONG JOURNEY
ON A VERY PECULIAR SEA]

(BILL joins in)

AHOY! AHOY!

BILL

AFTER ABOUT FIVE OR SIX WEEKS
NOTHING AT ALL WAS LEFT TO EAT

(ADRIAN joins in)

AHOY! AHOY!

ADRIAN

THEY ROLLED THE DICE, THEY FLIPPED A COIN
TO FIGURE OUT ON WHOM TO DINE

(BILL does *not* join in. He grabs a tin can with a sharp-edged lid.
ADRIAN keeps singing.)

AHOY! AHOY!

(A PAUSE.

They eye each other. ADRIAN grins, BILL keeps looking at
ADRIAN. BILL grins too, drops the tin can, and they resume the
singing together.)

ADRIAN AND BILL

AT THAT MOMENT, A MIRACLE,
A SCHOOL OF FISHES JUMPED ABOARD
AHOY! AHOY!

BILL

Wait... You don't believe in miracles.

ADRIAN

And you do...

(A BRIEF PAUSE)

Redemption without salvation!

(They eye each other)

Well, don't just stand there, lead the way...

(END OF PLAY)