

SAMPLE CHAPTER
The Sandpaper Dragon
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This is from the film version adapted from my play, The Sandpaper Dragon. In the play, which is set in the East Village in the 1970's, Paul, a successful headhunter (personnel recruiter) has decided to follow his dream and open up a woodworking studio, exposing his wife to a life of entrepreneurial challenges and a downgraded lifestyle that fills her with disdain and sadness. In this scene, they debate their situation with Paul coming up with a disturbing solution to their dilemma.

INT. APARTMENT. EAST SIXTH STREET. NEW YORK -- AFTERNOON

MED Paul and Anita both pacing back and forth in their small apartment.

PAUL
You're giving me a headache!

ANITA
(obviously continuing an argument)
I don't want to live here anymore. Everyday before I get up, I have to carefully check if that somebody behind the staircase is only nodding out or awake and dangerous, in which case I have to wait until he leaves or someone removes him. I'm sick of our problems.

PAUL
Problems. Know anyone who doesn't have any?

ANITA
People who don't live on Sixth Street.

PAUL
Everyone has problems. Do those people on Fifth Avenue look any less troubled? Maybe it's the pressure of a high-paying job instead of three extra kids to feed, maybe a five thousand annual raise that didn't come through, but it's still tension- it's still pain that tears into a man's guts. I don't think we're going to avoid pain by moving.

ANITA

Can't a person have some choice as to his own variety of despair? Can't I choose to despair in a house with a rock garden and a picket fence instead of despairing in a crummy little rat-trap with roaches, surrounded by an ocean of heroin addicts.

PAUL

But I want to live here, Anita.

ANITA

Why?

PAUL

Because it's INFORMATIVE. Because this poverty seems realer to me in its boldness, its transparent ugliness than any other variety of desperation I can think of. I can swallow this pain without choking on it.

ANITA

Why should you be choking anyway? You didn't make these people suffer.

PAUL

Because I know that behind each of these hungry children there's a father without a decent job- and, behind him and thousands of men like him, there's another man, a man with his own small apartment building, a doorman, a small garden in the middle of his lobby and a wife who buys her clothes at Bergdoff Goodman's or another man, who owns a rubber factory, who lives in a mansion in-

ANITA

But that's not your fault, Paul. It's the economy. It's also people's inertia and lack of concern for their own welfare.

PAUL

Yeah, maybe- to an extent. But these people aren't brought up like we were- I just can't forget those little Puerto Rican children on the fourth floor. We don't see them anymore. Maria won't look me in the eyes. Simon and his brother ignore me.

ANITA

We can't have those children up here every minute.

PAUL

Things would have been all right if we hadn't given the party and lost our balance. I thought it would be just an ordinary party with ice cream and cake and funny paper hats. But I didn't imagine that those kids had never had a party like that. I don't think I've ever seen children as happy as that during the first part of the evening. The problem was that...

ANITA

They wouldn't leave. They kept ducking under the couch, sneaking in the side door when someone else was leaving.

PAUL

I think one of the saddest moments of my life was making those kids go home.

ANITA

It didn't bother me at all. Why should we put up with them all night? Even after the party, they kept coming back at odd hours, making noise... until I had to tell them not to ever come back- for my own sanity. I have enough trouble with the idea of being a mother to my own children, much less taking care of children who have one.

PAUL

Their mother works all day. An old aunt takes care of them when they're not in school.

ANITA

Why did they have to keep on coming back- again and again?

PAUL

They don't have any place to play, Anita. Do you know how small their apartment is? I don't know how many times I've seen Manuel run out into the street - you can see how little he is - and a whole gang of little delinquents pounce on him- not really because they're bullies, but because Manuel's the only fun around.

ANITA

I've never seen anyone as hung up on things you can't even begin to deal with as you. What a waste of your time! I think you should be grateful for the options you have. Because you can move out of here whenever

you want. You can afford to look at these people like little germs in your moral microscope, because you know damn well you have an escape valve. You're all set- with your goddamn credentials.

PAUL
Credentials?

ANITA
You have only a half an year to go to graduate college. You could go back any time. Your parents would help you. You know that, with your record as a counselor, you could move right back into a responsible job anytime you wanted. Sid might even take you back.

PAUL
So? Isn't that good? Doesn't that give you some security?

ANITA
As long as I stay with you. But what if you insist on staying here and I want to leave?

PAUL
Without me?

ANITA
Yes. Don't be shocked. I don't want to be gruesome, but you don't even have life insurance. Suppose you decided to leave me?

PAUL
I'm not going to leave you.

ANITA
You might. You never can tell, Paul It's been done before.

PAUL
O.K. Suppose I did?

ANITA
I'm completely lost. I can't afford a good apartment without a decent job. And I can't get a job unless I have a degree in something.

PAUL
What do you want?

ANITA

Let me finish up my year and a half in City College and go teach.

PAUL

I don't want you to teach.

ANITA

Why do you keep saying that?

PAUL

You know perfectly well why. Because reality, you don't want to. I'm just verbalizing something that made you get up and leave school in your third year.

ANITA

I left school because of you. You know that.

PAUL

Why don't you give me a little time?

ANITA

Because someone's got to be practical around here. You and Charlie screw around in that sleezy loft- he, because he's some kind of maniac carpenter- and you because of some psychological problem you've got about white collar work.

PAUL

I need this work to get into myself. When I'm in an office, it's impossible.

ANITA

I don't see how it's more possible in that miserable world you now live in... with your customers constantly bitching, with Charlie and you nearly coming to blows every day, with the incredible money problems we're having.

PAUL

It'll get better. Basically, there's more of a chance. Sometimes, when I'm sanding, it begins to happen. Funny, it's not when I'm designing or doing fancy routing.

ANITA

I don't know what you're talking about.

PAUL

I got this feeling. It's like I'm being wrapped in a blanket of light... only that light is sweet, almost penetrating.

ANITA

I'm supposed to starve so you can wrap yourself in a blanket.

PAUL

It's funny it only seems to happen when I'm sanding.

ANITA

It's too bad we can't eat sandpaper. We could use your scraps for a salad or pudding. A chocolate sandpaper mousse. Delicious! A change from that awful Good Shepherd cereal you keep buying.

PAUL

It's good for you. It's got nuts and raisins and...

ANITA

(somewhat tenderly)
You're an idiot.

PAUL

All you think about it money.

ANITA

What else is there to think about when you live in a little black hole in the middle of some rotten, decaying tenement buildings, your only pleasure a broken, little AM radio with a cracked, plastic chassis? Everyday, you make one prayer: Please, Dear God, do not let that little radio completely self-destruct because, if it does, I will go completely out of my mind.

PAUL

If you had something constructive to do, you wouldn't feel this way. I keep telling you, find a more creative outlet for your energies.

ANITA

Who can think about creativity when you go to sleep hungry? Here in New York in the twentieth century.

PAUL

Stop being so melodramatic. You always manage to eat.

He pinches her stomach. She draws away.

ANITA

Don't touch me.

PAUL

You haven't lost any weight since you've been here.

ANITA

Haven't you ever seen pictures of the Germans during the depression? You can get fat on potatoes.

PAUL

You look all right.

ANITA

All we had last night was soup. I was hungry when I went to sleep last night.

PAUL

The trouble is you're spoiled.

ANITA

I am not. I'm hungry. I can't stand this anymore. You don't care whether I'm dead or alive.

PAUL

Are you going to start that again?

ANITA

Just don't be surprised.

PAUL

You're not going to affect me with that kind of talk.

ANITA

If you don't get me out of this oppressive, miserable place...

PAUL

Look around you. There are other people here. They're not committing suicide because their garbage isn't being collected every day.

ANITA

Poverty for you is a big adventure. When I was a kid, I never wore anything that wasn't a hand-me-down from Natalie. My father didn't have the time or energy to clothe us or feed us like other kids in the neighborhood. All he could think of was my mother in

the hospital and he needed money for x-rays and check-ups and medicine.

PAUL

At least you had something to wear. How about that wretched old crone on Fifth Street who sells rags freshly hand-picked from the garbage dump in the lot around the corner of First Avenue. Now, there's real poverty. And I'll be she doesn't have an older sister to depend on.

ANITA

Why, that old woman's crazy. Oh, God, Paul, why are you so mean? All I wasn't to do is finish up school, earn a little money on my own.

PAUL

I don't want you to go back to college. I don't want any more uncreative drains on my life.

ANITA

But it's my life, too. Besides what's so creative about being a carpenter and uncreative about being a teacher?

PAUL

You aren't a school teacher. I know it. And, goddamn it, you do, too.

ANITA

Why are you so convinced about that?

PAUL

What did you study in school?

ANITA

Art history.

PAUL

And why did you study that?

ANITA

Because there was no real fine arts major.

PAUL

So?

ANITA

So I compromised. I drew on the side. I was all right, Paul. I liked college.

PAUL
No, you didn't.

ANITA
I did, Paul. I really did.

PAUL
Get it together, Anita. You didn't like college.
You hated it.

ANITA
Why, Paul? I got good marks. I had a lot of
friends- both in my sorority and out of it. On
weekends, I used to date in Philadelphia- until you
came along. On the whole, I enjoyed my life.

PAUL
But those are externals. Weren't you really
frustrated?

ANITA
Look- all I said to you, once, was that I wished I
had studied painting. You're blowing it all out of
proportion.

PAUL
You mean to say that you really think you were happy?

ANITA
Of course. How many times do I have to say it?

PAUL
Do you expect me to believe that?

ANITA
What do you want me to do, Paul. All right, do you
want the truth?
(coquettishly)
Secretly, Paul- secretly, I always wanted to be a
ballerina.

PAUL
Are you serious?

ANITA
The reason that I went to study art history is that I
wanted to be a ballerina but I was scared.

PAUL
You're pulling my leg.

ANITA

No, not at all. I'm deadly serious. The only trouble was that I was afraid I wasn't good enough to compete at a university level.

PAUL

I can't believe it. Why haven't you told me this before?

ANITA

Because-

(dramatically)

I can't admit the failure of it. It's-
(her voice gets lyrically high-pitched)
too much for me to admit.

PAUL

Is it true?

ANITA

Of course, it's true. Ever since I was a little girl, I worshipped Martha Graham. Mom used to take me to the ballet in Philly on weekends. I always knew what I wanted to be. I took ballet lessons since I was seven years old- until college.

PAUL

I never realized the dimensions ballet had in your life. I thought your mother forced you to go.

ANITA

No, I often forced her. But, in the end, it didn't matter. I gave it up.

PAUL

Why?

ANITA

Oh, I don't know.

PAUL

Are you sure? This is important.

ANITA

(musing)

I guess it was- death!

PAUL

Death!

ANITA
(that lyrically high-pitched voice again)
Yes, death. That sweet, final dance!

PAUL
(quite seriously)
I don't understand.

ANITA
Ballet is so- organically connected with the body.
It's so- disgracefully mortal. You're allowed to
grow old gracefully writing or painting. But not so
with ballet. Growing old with ballet is putting your
wrinkles and sagging muscles on a pedestal.

PAUL
But can't you teach it? You don't have to continue
to dance.

ANITA
I thought of that, Paul. But there's no getting away
from it. Ballet is marked by its connection to the
body. It will not break you free from the body's
frailty. But, still, I think my attitude was wrong.

PAUL
Why, Anita?

ANITA
Better to grow old in the beauty of dance than to
live without beauty, without music... But it's too
late, now.

PAUL
Why is that?

ANITA
I'm twenty-five. My body's no good anymore. I'm too
old.

PAUL
Are you sure?

ANITA
Who can become a dancer at twenty-five?

PAUL
You're still limber. I've seen you do leg stretches.

ANITA

Don't be silly. There's no way.

PAUL
There is.

ANITA
Ballet lessons are expensive. We don't have the money.

PAUL
We'll do it.

ANITA
You're dreaming, Paul. You're playing the Sandman again.

PAUL
Give me the phone.

ANITA
(a little fearful of his impetuosity)
What are you going to do?

PAUL
(emphatically)
I said- give me the phone!

She hands it to him. He dials.

PAUL (CONT'D)
Hello, Charlie... I got bad news. No, everything's all right. System WILL send it this afternoon. That's not the problem. If you look, you'll see the sanding's already finished. Will you shut up for a minute? I'm quitting. I have to. Yes, I know we have an agreement. But something's come up. Anita needs lessons. I can't continue it on thirty dollars a week. Yes, I know this whole thing was originally my idea. What are you bitching about? George is just waiting to move in. I know we didn't make any decision. But, man, you sometimes gotta do it on your own... Well, I think I'll go back to the agency for another year. Of course, I'll hate it. But this is more important. Ballet. No, I just can't be that selfish. I'll just keep taking lessons and really get ready this time. Yeah, actual carpentry lessons would be a good thing. I know- I know- you still don't think I don't know how to hold a hammer. O.K.

Think what you like. I'm backing out, anyway. I'm sorry. Look, I'll talk to you tomorrow.

ANITA

What did you just do? You're quitting the shop. Just like that? You didn't even think about it.

PAUL

You were always complaining. Why worry about my decision?

ANITA

You didn't quit because I was complaining.

PAUL

That's right. Before it was bullshit. But now there's a real reason for leaving. Your vocation.

ANITA

You mean what I just said? Ballet? What's real about that?

PAUL

It was an expression of you. This is what I've been waiting for since we got married. I know what I want to do- and I can wait. But if you're ever going to dance, you've got to start right now.

ANITA

But I don't know anything about dancing.

PAUL

But I thought you said you had lessons since you were seven years old.

ANITA

(flushed)

That was when I was a little girl. I'd have to start all over again. You don't expect me to do that, do you?

Paul nods.

ANITA (CONT'D)

But what if I don't want to take lessons. What if I don't know how to dance? What if I were lying?

PAUL

Better learn.

ANITA
What if I don't want to?

PAUL
I think you know the answer to that.

ANITA
You'd leave me.

He looks straight at her. She turns towards him.

ANITA (CONT'D)
You would, wouldn't you?
(pause)
I don't know what to say.

PAUL
Don't say anything.

ANITA
But-

PAUL
Listen, I've got to make some phone calls before
five. Why don't you go out and shop around?

ANITA
For what?

PAUL
For some good schools.

She doesn't understand.

PAUL (CONT'D)
Ballet schools.

ANITA
You're serious?

PAUL
I am.
(pause)
Don't come back until you've found one.

ANITA
You can't do this, Paul. It isn't fair.

PAUL

I'm doing it, aren't I? Now, you'll have money, as much as you need- for now.

ANITA

You're throwing me out on the street.

PAUL

Not throwing. Gently placing.

ANITA

What if I can't find one? Or don't want to.

PAUL

Don't come back until you do. I mean it.

ANITA

I can find a school for ballet, Paul. But how do I find a school for making dreams.

He hands her a PURSE and watches her as she puts her COAT on. While she is doing this, she stares at him intently. CLOSE-IN as he fishes into his pocket and takes out some MONEY, opens her PURSE, takes out her WALLET and carefully tucks the MONEY in it.

PAUL

Better find one, Anita.

ANITA

Find what?

PAUL

One of those schools.

She gives him a sharp look. CAMERA FOLLOWS her into bathroom where she throws some TOILET ARTICLES into her PURSE. FAR SHOT, staring at him from bathroom before she stalks out. Paul begins to make phone calls. \