

Up the River Bank
(or Shark Bait)

A short play

By
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CHARACTER NAME	BRIEF DESCRIPTION	AGE	GENDER
SAMANTHA	A pale, frazzled woman in her late-forties wearing loose-fitting clothing.	Middle-aged	Female
ALEX	The idealized husband/father figure. Ex-husband of Samantha	Middle-aged	Male
RYAN	An unseemly, rugged fishmonger. Samantha's lover.	Late-sixties	Male

Curtains up. Open to an open pasture on a remarkably pleasant day. A river runs just off of and parallel to downstage. Enter SAMANTHA stage right. She wanders with an expression of sheer wonderment and bliss as she makes her way downstage center. Her empty eyes glide around the set like those of a newborn child seeing the world for the first time. She is lost in a kind of reverie.

SAMANTHA

Wow... Wow... (beat) Wow.

SAMANTHA bends over near the river and gingerly glides one hand through the passing water. She kneels. Giggling, she plunges both hands in. Her expression is washed with a kind of deep relief as she lets the cool, refreshing river water drag her in. Before it can take her completely, she retracts her hands and brings them to her face, where she feels the very same mountain ambrosia drip down her pale cheeks. The sensation is orgasmic.

SAMANTHA

Me? Oh, just passing the time - as one does. (beat) You know, I used to think I was going to be a swimmer, a professional swimmer. Yeah, I remember back in high school, I was the only freshman on the varsity team. I was that good. The other girls, they hated me for it. Called me 'Shark bait' 'cause I swam like my life depended on it. (beat) They all probably thought I'd end up in the Olympics or something.

SAMANTHA paddles the water with her hands.

SAMANTHA

I mean it's such a cliché, isn't it? The girl has all these aspirations ... All these - all these goals and then she just throws them away. She throws them away because she's heard this story before and she knows exactly how it'll end: she'll fall in love, get married, have kids, raise a family, and she'll be happy doing that. She'll be happy...

SAMANTHA drones off. She leans back and sits atop the river bed.

SAMANTHA

I stopped drinking. Did I tell you I stopped drinking? It was Ryan - he helped me. We had a deal, him and I. I'd quit drinking if he quit smoking. I thought it'd be kind of cute, you know? Saving each other's lives like that?

Although the deal wasn't really fair to begin with because, I mean, we now know that alcohol is far, far less, uh, addictive than tobacco so I wouldn't say the ratio is one-to-one. What would make it fair would be if, say, I had just a little Jack on some occasions, you know? Nothing big. Just - you know - something to balance the scale. So then we both get the, uh, the -

SAMANTHA trails off as her eyes become lost in the flowing river.

SAMANTHA

Oh, It doesn't matter anyway. I know he sneaks a pack of Camel with him whenever he goes fishing. I've seen him all the time from the shore! He'll be lounging in his dinghy. Sometimes, he won't even have a lure cast. He'll - he'll paddle out there just to smoke, just - just to get as far away from me as possible... No, I'm sure he adores me.

SAM reaches behind her, picking up a small twig which she uses to prod the river.

SAMANTHA

You know who really adored me? Alex adored me. And not because of some obligation, either! Not because we had kids and a house and friends and a life - not because of any of that! No, he adored me for me. For what I was, who he thought I was, who I thought I was. God, he was such a sweetheart. Why the hell did I leave?

SAM tosses the twig into the flowing river.

SAMANTHA

I guess this late in life what else is there to do, you know? I mean, as far as biology is concerned, I've served my purpose. I left Alex with three beautiful children. The brightest, most radiant rays of sunshine the world has ever seen. Nick, Helena, Earnest - they made rainbows out of rain, God knows I miss them. Oh fuck, why the hell did I leave?!

SAM reaches into her pockets to slowly bring out a packet of camel cigarettes. She inspects it closely.

SAMANTHA

We took these annual camping trips - Alex, the kids, and I. Always to the same spot: A valley of Redwoods on the outskirts of Yosemite. We'd set our tent up in a glade that was a five minute walk from the The American River. Right there was where I first taught the kids how to swim. It wasn't a few years later that they were racing across its girth, strokes against the current like Sebagen Salmon.

SAM tightly grasps the pack of cigarettes in the palm of her hand.

She hears the sound of children giggling and cheering and splashing each other. She looks longingly out towards the river.

SAMANTHA

I - I remember those bright, sunny days on the riverbank. I'd watch the kids jump over the rapids while I read poetry and sipped a little gin I snuck from home. Then Alex would come over and sit by me and I'd hide the gin and he'd pretend he didn't see it and he'd hold my hand with tears streaking down his face and say with that tender voice of his: "Darling, look at what we made together". God, he was such a romantic - not like Ryan. Fishmonger in his mid-sixties, couldn't understand Jack and Rose without whiskey and a degree in horticulture.

SAM violently tosses the pack into the lake, silencing the imaginary children. She then begins to pace furiously by the shore.

SAMANTHA

- But I didn't need a romantic, you know? I didn't need my knight in shining armor, a Jack to my Rose. I just needed to get away - as far away as humanely possible from those damned reigns of destiny. (beat) One night, I concluded that no one was coming for me and that I alone had to make my escape. I look around the house, nobody's home. Everybody's got plans. So I start with a bottle of pills from Alex's clinic. I lock myself in cupboard with some Smirnoff and a note made out to Alex and the kids from yours truly. (beat) Dear Alex, dear kids, I'm sorry... It's not your fault. Love, Mom. (beat) I started counting sheep. Whatever I took hit hard, and by the time I got to twenty, the walls felt like dough and the vodka tasted like a sweet nectar.

SAM stops suddenly, her expression grave. She stares slightly downward, speaking with a tone of sincerity and exhaustion, as if castigating a hopeless child.

SAMANTHA

Suddenly, my perspective shifts, and now I'm staring down at the cabinet - watching myself fade. This is what two decades of partnership - two decades of tender love and adoration - this is what it all led to. Through the door, I'm listening to myself sob and drink and ramble nonsense and I feel powerless to help. (beat) I am him carrying her into the car. I am him driving her to the emergency ward, telling the nurses that "she messed up on her medication". An 'innocent mistake', I lie. I see them roll my wife's unconscious body into the ICU. (beat) I thought first of the kids - about how I was going to break the news that their mother just chose to abandoned them like that. I thought of myself - if there was anything I could have done to prevent it.

SAMANTHA falls backwards, landing on her rear. She begins slowly removing her shoes and socks.

SAMANTHA

I remember waking up in a hospital bed with the worst hangover, wondering if this was God's ironic idea of an afterlife. I remember seeing my darling Alex standing across the room. My sweet, sweet, Alex - looking at me like with an... ethereal gaze. He whispers something inaudibly under his breath - and I'm hoping, praying, that what he said was some form of apology. God's sake, I'm treading quick sand here! Would it kill you to show a little sympathy?

SAM dips her feet into the running river. She exhales a long sigh of relief.

SAMANTHA

That was two years ago. I wonder where I am right now. I haven't known for a while. (beat) I don't - I don't remember ever coming here before. The river's colder than the American. Runs faster, too. I wonder how far south it goes. Probably a few leagues, at least. Hell, what's stopping it from going all the way to Mexico?

She audibly begins choking. Sam lays on the river shore, weeping softly. Enter ALEX downstage right. ALEX carries an expression that's a delicate mix of pity, sympathy, and innocent joy. He tenderly approaches the sobbing SAMANTHA and kneel adjacent her head.

SAMANTHA

I thought I'd never see you again.

SAM sits up, leaning her head against ALEX's shoulder. In response, ALEX leans his head against her's.

SAMANTHA

How are the kids?

ALEX

Nick is captain of the water-polo team. Helena is doing a lot of painting. Earnest is going to Humboldt next fall.

SAMANTHA

I always knew there was in artist in Helena - girl was doodling before she could speak. Earnest's going to college? Can we afford it?

ALEX

He's on a scholarship.

SAMANTHA

He's always been the smart one. (beat) Are they happy?

ALEX

They're fine.

SAMANTHA

Do they mention me?

ALEX stares serenely forward. SAM glances up at him and then back to the river.

SAMANTHA

Good - that's good. (beat) What about you? Past couple of years have done you well, huh? New haircut, clean-shaven... Seeing anybody special?

ALEX

Remember Rosy?

SAMANTHA

The psychiatrist? I always thought you had a thing for her! God, Alex - that makes me so happy to hear!

ALEX

We were seeing enough of each other anyway, so we just kind of figured, you know.

SAMANTHA

That's so great.

ALEX

Yeah.

SAM smiles. It looks as though she has just had a huge weight pulled off her shoulders.

ALEX

How's Ryan?

SAMANTHA

He's fine. Hey, I stopped drinking. Did I tell you I stopped drinking?

ALEX

No! Stopped drinking? Sam, you're like a completely changed woman!

She chuckles.

SAMANTHA

No - just boring-er.

ALEX

I like boring-er.

SAMANTHA

Yeah - yeah, I know.

SAM buries her head deeper into ALEX's neck.

SAMANTHA

I'm happy it didn't end in that cabinet.

ALEX

So am I.

SAMANTHA

Gave me the chance to really reflect, you know?

ALEX

Yeah. We - the kids and I - have also had a lot of time to think ever since you left.

SAMANTHA

Yeah?

RYAN

(whistling, shouting from the brush)

Sam! Saaam! Where are you, hun? You know you can't hide forever, sweetheart! Sam!

SAMANTHA

Fucking shit, it's Ryan!

ALEX

A lot of time to really think.

SAMANTHA

Of course! Of course that nosy son-of-a-bitch had to ruin this perfect moment! God Alex, I can't take this anymore! I really, really just fucking can't! I can't, I - (beat) You know what? You know what? Forget everything. Let's get out of here! Let's you and I go as far away as possible from here or home or Ryan or anywhere else! We go start something new, yeah? A fresh new life together-

ALEX

(ignoring pleas, urgent)

Sam, I think - I think the kids forgive you. They understand that they'll never understand why you did the things you did, and I think that's the best they can do.

The sound of kids splashing can be heard emanating from the river. Samantha's head jolts upwards - looking out into the river.

SAMANTHA

Is that -

ALEX

And you know what, Sharky? I forgive you. I know you've been through your own kind of hell long enough to get your feet charred black, but you should know: you're always going to be my angel fallen from grace, and if it's any solace, we're doing fine without you.

SAMANTHA

(excitedly)

Alex, is that -

ALEX

They wanted to say hi! You know I couldn't stop them if I tried.

SAMANTHA

They're beautiful.

ALEX

You're too modest. (beat) Hey, they're calling us! What say we join them?

SAM, grinning uncontrollably, shakes ALEX off.

SAMANTHA

(playfully)

What? I - I can't swim in this, you crazy fuck! Not in a million years!

ALEX gets up from his sitting position, and quickly removes his pants and shirt to reveal a bathing suit underneath.

ALEX

“Not in a million years!” Come on, where’s the little “Shark bait” I married, huh? Where’s she behind those bloodshot eyes?

ALEX leaps off the stage into the river depths. SAM watches him dive with an expression of overwhelming happiness. She giggles playfully. ALEX calls to her from the water.

ALEX

Last one across is a rotten egg!

SAM looks to give herself up to a kind of ethereal force. Her face is in a happy trance as her body steadily moves forward into the river’s depths and off the stage.

A few hours pass. The ambiance of the scene becomes slightly more grim. Enter RYAN upstage right. He furiously crosses downstage, shouting and scanning the void for his lover.

RYAN

Run off with my cigarettes, why don’t you? You want to talk about harm to my lungs, talk about the breath I’ve wasted trying to get you to settle the fuck down!

RYAN looks out in the river, a look of sheer terror overcomes him.

RYAN

Sam? Sam!

RYAN sprints desperately into the river.

FADE TO BLACK.