

Umbrella

By

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Characters

Helen, 30's, reasonably fashionable on a small budget.

Frank, 30's. Glasses. Smokes incessantly. Business clothes, suit coat, white short sleeve shirt and a tie.

Where

The rooftop of an apartment building in a large city. Red brick encloses the perimeter of the performance space. There is a door, with an angled roof behind. A chair. An umbrella.

Time

Late summer. It is hot. It is humid. It hasn't rained for a long time.

Final notes

A *pause* is a moment for a search for the right word, for clarity, reflection, or a breath.

A *silence* is a moment of listening and is longer than a pause and even longer than you think.

When **Frank** looks across the way, he is looking into the window of an apartment of a young couple he watches. He is checking in, looking for guidance. They are his lifeline.

In darkness...

A low deep rumble, mechanical, steel impacting steel, grinding, it is molten. Air screams, rushing out, escaping.

Lights fade in. Night. An old rooftop. A chair. A can for cigarette butts. The door and slanted roof of the stairway down, leaning against it, an umbrella. Beyond: the city, the sky.

HELEN stands center, arms wrapped around her stomach, she sways as if she has just woken up.

Behind her, concealed in the shadows, FRANK smokes. The glow of his cigarette, smoke drifts.

HE steps towards HELEN.

Silence. Kids taunt a car as it passes below.

Finally.

Are you ok? FRANK

You brought me up here? HELEN

Yes. Yes. I wasn't sure— FRANK

Where—? HELEN

On the sidewalk— FRANK

Where am I? HELEN

I— FRANK
What?

Beat.

FRANK

Down on the sidewalk. I heard you. Screaming. You were screaming, when I got there, you had collapsed.

HELEN

Where am I?

FRANK

I, I found you...it was just you...you were begging—

HELEN

WHERE AM I?

Pause.

FRANK

On a roof. My roof.
It's. It's.
I thought. You'd be safe. Here.

HELEN

Am I?

Silence. A Church bell strikes eleven.

FRANK *simply*

Of course.

*FRANK removes his coat, folds it carefully. He loosens his tie.
HELEN watches this.*

FRANK

Good to get out of that. That monkey suit. You know. In this heat. It's. It sort of. Chokes? Makes me. I sweat. I don't. By the end of the day. The end of the day, you have to...things have to be peeled, peeled off. You're finally free of, of, of...the monkey suit. It could be worse, it could—

HELEN

I don't like heights.

FRANK considers this...he looks down. Then back at her.

FRANK

It's only ten stories.

HELEN

That's a height.

Pause. FRANK looks down again.

FRANK

Oh. Yes. Yes. I...it is.

HE looks down.

You would never survive that fall.
But you wouldn't feel it.

HELEN

?

FRANK

Well, you'd black out before....you.... hit. Hit the pavement. Everything. Well. It would go black.

Silence. FRANK takes a drag of his smoke.

HELEN

Can I have a cigarette?

FRANK

?

HELEN points.

FRANK

Oh. You? Yes. Yes.

HE digs out a pack of smokes.

HE pulls one out and offers it. SHE holds out her hand.

Pause.

HE steps towards her and places it in her hand. SHE puts it in her mouth.

HE leans forward to light it. She steps back. He hands her the lighter.

She lights her smoke, hands him back the lighter.

Silence.

FRANK

Are you—?

HELEN

Stop.

FRANK

I thought I should ask.
It looked like I should ask.
I asked.

HELEN

Stop asking.

FRANK

Are you ok?

HELEN

Yes.

Pause.

FRANK

Frank. My name. I'm Frank.

*HELEN laughs quietly, cover her mouth, turns away.
Beat.*

FRANK

What?

HELEN shakes her head, not wanting to explain.

Oh. Ok.

Pause.

HELEN

Thanks. For the smoke. Frank.

She turns to leave. FRANK stands in her way.

Silence.

FRANK

Most people. When you introduce...yourself...respond with their name.

Pause.

It's not really fair, is it? You know my name. I don't know yours, it's. It's not. And I even gave you—

HELEN

Helen.

FRANK

Helen.

She nods. FRANK doesn't move.

That's nice. That's a nice name.

HELEN

Don't. I'm not looking for—

FRANK

No. No. I didn't. No.
I just want to...talk.

Silence.

Do you?
Stay.

HELEN

I don't know you.

FRANK

That's ok. That's ok. We can, um...you know...we could—

HELEN

Get to know each other?

FRANK

Yes. Yes. That's it.

HELEN

I'm leaving.

FRANK

No, no. Please.

HELEN

You've been nice. I appreciate that.

Then stay. FRANK

It's not a good— HELEN

I've seen you. FRANK

Beat.

Before. Haven't I? Seen you before? You look familiar.

Familiar? HELEN

Pause.

Well. Yeah. I think so. Do you live around here? Maybe— FRANK

I don't live around here. HELEN

Oh. Where then? FRANK

HELEN doesn't answer.

Familiar. Yes. That's it. Just so...

Familiar. HELEN

Stay. FRANK

I don't think you really— HELEN

I'm nice. I'm a nice guy. I am. FRANK

HELEN drops and steps on her smoke. She again turns away.

FRANK

I picked you off the street. When no one else—
You were screaming, begging.

HELEN

Don't.

FRANK

Begging. Screaming.

HELEN

Please. Don't.

FRANK

You were screaming for someone, and if it hadn't been for me—!

HELEN

PLEASE.

Beat.

FRANK

Right. Right.
I'm. I'm a nice guy. And you seem...nice.
This, this has been nice.

HELEN

Nice.

FRANK

Yes. And. Stay. Up here. With me.
Just a little longer. Please. I know it's late.

HELEN

Late?

FRANK

Ish. Lateish. Not...really...but...you know people are going to bed.

HELEN

When I'm awake and when I'm asleep...it all blends together.
I'm not sure anymore.

FRANK

Does it matter? Something is always open or on TV, or in a big city like this...
It can be very nice up here. Very nice.

HELEN

Really?

FRANK

Oh. Yes. The view. It. It...the city...lights.
Right out of a ...now...If the moon

*The Moon comes out.
FRANK and HELEN look.*

A breath.

FRANK

It never works like that.

BOTH are struck still by the moon.

Horns. Shouting from below, angry. FRANK goes and looks down. HE's embarrassed.

FRANK

The neighborhood isn't normally...this. It's not normally this dangerous.

FRANK looks at her. HE looks down. Across. Then back to her.

FRANK

You should be um more careful at night. It's...there are...it's very dangerous.

HELEN

You got it wrong, Frank.
It's during the day you have to be careful. During the day is when the city is dangerous.
More people, more cars, more chaos.

FRANK

Yes. Yes. That's true.
I was almost hit by a cab last week.
I mean I was, I WAS hit. He nicked me. He was rolling through the stop, smacked me
good and hard. I shouted after him, but...

HELEN

But what?

FRANK

Well. Nothing. Nothing happened. He didn't stop.

Pause.

HELEN

I was run over by a woman with a box of donuts.

FRANK

Really?

HELEN

Yeah.

She was barreling down the sidewalk, it was...it was two boxes of donuts, large ones, one stacked on top of another...and she was short, and she was dressed in a real nice suit...and she was moving quickly...bam...didn't even see me. I was completely laid out, the two boxes scattered. She collected them, said a passing "I'm sorry" over her shoulder, and kept on going.

FRANK nods. He understands. HELEN smiles, it disappears quickly. HE looks out across the way. Into an apartment.

HELEN

Do you have any more cigarettes?

FRANK

Almost a new pack.

He pulls out the pack.

You'll stay?

HELEN holds out her hand. FRANK picks a smoke and hands it to her. HE plucks one for himself, then puts the pack back into his pocket.

HE looks at something on the roof. HER cigarette butt. HE takes it between two fingers and drops it into the can. FRANK will repeat this action as necessary throughout the play.

HE turns back to HELEN. HE flicks his lighter. It does not work. HE speaks as HE keeps trying to light his smoke.

FRANK

So. Uh. Um. Helen.

He tries to think of something.

He shrugs. HE tries again.

Surrendering.

So. What do you do?

Flick, flick. Helen looks at him.

Me? Well. I. I work with paper.

*HELEN laughs. Nodding.
Frank stops. Stares.*

HELEN

You work with paper. That's funny.

FRANK

No. It's not.

Flick, flick.

HELEN

Yes. It is.

Flick, flick.

FRANK

I didn't mean for it to be funny.

HELEN

You said you work with paper...like you're digging ditches with the morning newspaper, like you build houses with construction paper...you work side by side with...paper. It was funny.

FRANK

Oh. Yeah. I see.

Flick, flick.

I...

It sounded like you...Look, I do what I have to. It's hard enough sometimes to find work in this city. It may not be much, but, it's what I have, and I work. It just kills me when people have to make fun of...

SHE crosses to him, takes the lighter, blows into it, lights it.

HELEN

I wasn't making fun.

She lights his smoke, then her own.

Silence. Car horns below.

FRANK

I've been chain smoking lately. I haven't been able to....I need something to do.

HELEN

I don't taste them anymore.

HE smiles.

Takes a drag. Exhales as HELEN takes a drag.

She exhales.

It's awkward.

FRANK turns away.

FRANK

Nice up here, isn't it?

HELEN

I don't like—

FRANK

Heights. Yes. Yes. Right.

Amazing what you can see. Up here. The whole city...just...it just

His arms push away from him. The enormity of the city stretching away.

You can see...

He points.

Downtown. Uptown. Business. Residential. North. South. East. West.

All around us. Everything.

We're surrounded.

She doesn't laugh at his joke.

Surrounded. Yes. Some of my favorite things. Um. Let's see.

FRANK looks around.

Then he chooses.

...the river. Just through the buildings. Rippling.

And over here, over here, if you peak, peak through, you can just see...come here—

HELEN

I'll trust you.

FRANK

If you peak through those two buildings you can just see the park. Well. The fountains at the park.

Come here.

You'll be fine.

He offers his hand.

I'll hold your—

An angry horn blast.

HELEN doesn't move.

FRANK drops his hand.

The fountain is beautiful at night.

HELEN

I've seen it at night. I've seen it.

FRANK

Not from up here.

A moment, then, HELEN steps towards the ledge. She peaks. She inhales.

HELEN

Do you know what they used to do there? In that park?

FRANK shakes his head. HELEN smiles.

Breathe it in. Can't you taste it? The rust, the iron in the air.

When the city was founded, they used this land for public executions. Hangings.

Sometimes they would go wrong, too much weight on the body and the head would pop right off.

The blood would soak into the ground in time for the next execution. The city stopped doing executions outside about two hundred years ago some rich man turned the whole place into a park.

Silence.

FRANK
That's dark.

HELEN shrugs.

HELEN
I read things.

HELEN takes a hold of her fingers, begins to twist them, compulsively, painfully.

She turns away from FRANK, finding the umbrella.

She holds it, then pops it open. She looks at him.

FRANK
In case it rains.

HELEN
It hasn't rained in forever.

FRANK
Just two months.

HELEN
Forever.
What do you think it feels like?

FRANK
Rain?

HELEN nods.

Wet.

HELEN collapses the umbrella.

FRANK reaches into his pocket, gets out his smokes. HE opens the pack.

Looks.

FRANK frowns.

HELEN
What?

FRANK
Fifteen left.

HELEN holds out her hand. HE lays it on her palm. HE takes one. HE lights her smoke.

HELEN
What's it good for? The umbrella?

FRANK
When it rains.

HELEN
Til then, it's just useless. It's just—

Car horns, yelling, nasty. A fight. FRANK moves to the ledge.

FRANK
Just. Just. Just. I wish they'd—always yelling. Why don't—

HELEN
People yell.

FRANK
Back and forth, back and forth yelling.
Gangs.

HELEN laughs.

FRANK
?

HELEN
Gangs.

FRANK
Yes.

HELEN
Quaint.

FRANK
What should I call them?

HELEN
Ruffians? Hoodlums—?

FRANK
Don't make fun of—

HELEN

I'm not—

FRANK

They don't need to yell—

HELEN

TO BE HEARD.

Frank is still.

To be heard over the city. That's why you yell.

FRANK

Not up here. It's quiet.

Up here...we can see for miles.

Up here...we can almost see the stars...some nights...you can see.

Up here...we...

...yes.

Silence.

A siren in the far distance. It is barely audible, but it is approaching.

FRANK looks out. To the apartment across the way. For a moment HE is somewhere else. Somewhere over there.

HE'S back. HE checks with HELEN, who was staring at her cigarette.

FRANK

It's time to eat. Are you hungry?

HELEN

?

FRANK

I normally eat at this...at this time. It's dinnertime.

HELEN

I'm not hungry.

FRANK

Sure you are. It's dinnertime.

HELEN

It's late.

FRANK

Yes, yes. Sometimes you have to eat late, sometimes you come home late and you have to eat late...the important thing is you have to eat.

HELEN

Really. I'm not hungry.

FRANK reaches into a different pocket of his coat. HE pulls out a paper bag, reaches in, pulls out two sandwiches, somewhat mangled.

FRANK

I have ham and peanut butter.
I didn't have enough ham for two sandwiches.
You can pick.

HE holds them out.

HELEN

I'm not hungry.

FRANK

It's time...
Eat the ham sandwich.

HELEN

No.

FRANK

Then eat the peanut butter.

HELEN

I am NOT hungry.

FRANK

IT'S DINNER TIME.

HELEN

I don't care what time it is.

FRANK

Now is when we eat, we will eat together, we will eat a nice dinner.

HE takes a bite out of the ham sandwich.

We? HELEN

I don't see anyone else.
Take the sandwich. FRANK

I don't want your sandwich. HELEN

BUT IT'S PEANUT BUTTER. FRANK

Beat.

I eat brick, Frank. I swallow tooth and mortar. HELEN

The siren arrives below.

Pause.

FRANK looks out, watches something for a moment, then looks at HELEN.

HE puts the sandwiches away.

Silence.

It's just a peanut butter sandwich, Helen. FRANK

Lights shift.