

Sparrows

Lights up. An elderly man, HUGO, sits on a park bench. It is mid-afternoon. He seems to be enjoying himself. After a moment, a young woman, HALLIE, jogs onstage, earphones in. She has short hair and looks rather tomboyish. Out of breath, she looks around for a place to sit down for a moment. Seeing apparently no empty benches, she reluctantly sits down on the opposite side of HUGO's bench. After a moment, HUGO speaks.

HUGO

Excuse me.

HALLIE cannot hear over the music. HUGO clears his throat.

(Louder) Excuse me.

No response. He tries to wave at her.

(Even louder) Hello, young lady?

HALLIE looks up, startled, and pulls out an earphone. HUGO smiles.

I thought only the old were hard of hearing.

HALLIE

Sorry.

HUGO

Could you tell me what time it is?

HALLIE consults her watch.

HALLIE

Three twenty-five.

HUGO

Ah. Thank you.

HALLIE starts to stick her earphones back in, but HUGO keeps speaking, so she stops.

Isn't this a lovely park? Peaceful. Restful.

HALLIE

Yeah, it's great.

HUGO

It suits me well. (Beat.) Yes, very well.

HALLIE puts her earphones back in.

I wish I had discovered it sooner.

After a moment, the sound of birds twittering is heard in the background.

Sparrows!

He looks up, apparently watching the birds. Suddenly, he leans over and taps HALLIE on the shoulder.

HUGO

Young lady? Do you see the sparrows?

HALLIE takes her earphones out and looks up.

HALLIE

What about them?

HUGO

Oh . . . they exist, that's all. Life is a beautiful thing. (He nods his head.) Yes, very beautiful indeed.

He sits contemplating for a moment. HALLIE glances at him, but gets up to continue her jog. She is about to leave when HUGO speaks.

Can you tell me the time?

HALLIE, mystified, consults her watch again.

HALLIE

Three twenty-six.

She starts to run off, but suddenly, he awkwardly and loudly tries a few birdcalls. HALLIE turns and stares at him, concerned. She hesitates for a moment, unsure of what to do.

Look, can I . . . do you need help with something?

HUGO

I don't think so, my dear. But that's very kind. (Beat.) No, I'm just waiting.

He goes back to bird calling.

HALLIE

Are you sure? I mean, you haven't lost your way or anything? Were you with somebody?

HUGO

I was, a long time ago, yes.

HALLIE

Like, an hour ago? I could help you find them if you need—

HUGO

(Shaking his head) No, no. I came to the park alone. (Beat. He seems amused.) Although, I'm not quite sure how to get back now. Can you tell me the time?

HALLIE

It's still three twenty-six. Do you have an appointment to keep?

She moves back to the bench.

HUGO

You could say that.

HALLIE

Doctor's appointment, maybe?

HUGO

Oh, no. That was yesterday.

HALLIE

(Sitting down again) Well, what then? Do you have any idea? Or an appointment card?

HUGO chuckles.

HUGO

I don't believe they make appointment cards for this kind of thing.

HALLIE looks at him in pity.

You needn't look so concerned, my dear. I haven't lost my mind. I'm just enjoying nature a bit while I'm waiting.

HALLIE

Waiting on what?

HUGO

Oh, my dear, I'm so sorry. I thought you knew. I'm waiting to die, of course.

HALLIE

(Taken aback) What? Die?

HUGO nods serenely.

HUGO

Yes. I have exactly six minutes to live.

HALLIE

That's ridiculous. How can you know the exact moment when you'll die?

HUGO

It's quite simple. My doctor told me yesterday, at exactly three thirty-two, that I had twenty-four hours to live.

HALLIE

(Relieved) Oh, you don't understand. That's more of an estimate. He didn't literally mean twenty-four hours, down to the minute.

HUGO

Nevertheless, I'm here waiting.

HALLIE

But surely you should be at home, with your family.

HUGO

I have no family to speak of. A few cousins in Milwaukee. My wife died years ago.

HALLIE

Does your doctor know this?

HUGO

Oh, yes.

HALLIE

And he didn't put you in a...hospice or anything like that? Where someone could take care of you?

HUGO

They tried, but I didn't want to go. I left when they weren't looking.

HALLIE

Was that a good idea?

HUGO

I think so. Besides, they couldn't have taken care of me the way that this park has. I've been here for almost twenty-four hours.

HALLIE

You haven't slept? Or eaten anything?

HUGO

(Amused) That would hardly be useful at this point.

HALLIE

Look, you're seeing this entirely the wrong way. When doctors say that kind of thing. . . . well, it's more or less an estimate. You could live much longer. Another day. Two days. You could live out the rest of the week, maybe, or even longer.

HUGO

I don't think so.

HALLIE

Sure you could. Some doctors told my aunt that she had six months to live, but it's been two years, and she's still alive.

HUGO

That's wonderful, my dear.

HALLIE

It's really more of an estimate. But not even a good one.

HUGO

Could you tell me the time?

HALLIE consults her watch impatiently.

HALLIE

Three twenty-eight. You should really be at home. Do you remember your address? I could call you a cab.

HUGO

Oh, no, I have long since forgotten my address.

HALLIE

What about a phone number? Do you have anyone you could call to come get you? A caretaker, friend, pastor, anyone at all?

HUGO

I have no one.

(Beat.)

HALLIE

Well, look, maybe...If you can't remember where to go, I can take you to the police station. They could help you out there.

HUGO

Please don't worry about me, young lady. What is your name?

HALLIE

Hallie. It's Hallie.

He offers his hand, and she shakes it.

HUGO

What a lovely name. My name is Hugo.

HALLIE

It's nice to meet you. But really, I can take you somewhere if you need—

HUGO

No, no, Hallie. Don't worry about me. I shan't be here much longer.

A pause.

Could you tell me the time?

HALLIE looks at her watch impatiently.

HALLIE

Three twenty-nine. But it really doesn't matter. You won't die.

A pause. HUGO simply nods serenely.

You can't just die, you know. I mean...if you want to live, you go on living, right?

HUGO

Perhaps.

HALLIE

If it was me . . . well, I wouldn't just lie down and die. I've got a lot of life ahead of me, and I bet you do too. You don't look so very old.

HUGO

(Smiling) Ah, you young people. You're really something. I remember what it was like.

HALLIE

What?

HUGO

To be young. I thought I would live forever. That was before I started losing my eyesight...my hearing . . . my memory.

HALLIE

Are you sure you shouldn't be at a . . . a home or something? I'm sure they could help you—

HUGO

Ah, but the fresh air is doing me good. Can't you tell?

HALLIE

Well, you don't look sick at all.

HUGO

Why should I go home? I'm not bothering anyone. I just wanted to spend my last moments outside, enjoying this beautiful world. Isn't it beautiful?

HALLIE looks around uncomfortably.

HALLIE

I suppose.

HUGO

What day is it?

HALLIE

It's October 5th.

HUGO

Isn't autumn a lovely time of year? Golden sunlight. Crisp air.

He points upward.

Red orange leaves. Really just an old tree dying slowly, you know. But so beautiful. (Beat.) Yes, it is a perfect day. And the sparrows are even here to keep me company! (Looking up) Sparrows have always been my favorite bird. Small, but tough.

HALLIE looks up.

HALLIE

I always thought they were so common and ordinary. They live everywhere.

HUGO

Ah, but so charming, don't you think? I can always count on sparrows to cheer me up, no matter where I am. I used to feed them as a boy. (Beat.) Can you tell me the time?

HALLIE

It's not time yet.

HUGO

Please.

HALLIE reluctantly looks at her watch.

HALLIE

Three thirty.

A pause.

HUGO

Did you know that they tried to kill all the sparrows in communist China?

HALLIE

What? Why?

HUGO

They were thought of as pests—classed with the rats and flies and mosquitos. People thought they were eating too many grain seeds, stealing all the food. The public was told to kill them when they had the chance. They almost went extinct there. Until all the rice crops died. You see, the sparrows ate lots of insects too. By the time they called off the war on sparrows, it was too late. Locusts were already swarming and millions died in the famine.

(Beat.)

HALLIE

Hey, you know what might make you feel better?

HUGO

I feel fine.

HALLIE

Something to eat.

HUGO

I'm not very hungry.

HALLIE

No, really. I'm sure it would do you good. I see a hotdog vendor over there.

HUGO

I don't need anything.

HALLIE

But you have to eat. You have to.

HUGO doesn't reply.

You can't just die. I mean, this is ridiculous. You're not *going* to die. It's silly. You look fine. You feel fine. How could you die? Just because someone said so, doesn't mean it's going to happen. And certainly not now, not in the next two minutes. Not while you have the sparrows.

HALLIE points upward, and they look together.

HUGO

Ah, yes, the sparrows. The sparrows will be my priests.

A pause. HALLIE looks at him.

The time, Hallie?

HALLIE

(Flatly) I don't know.

HUGO

Ah.

He sighs.

Well, it does not matter.

HALLIE

(Smiling) No, you're right! It absolutely doesn't. Who cares what time it is?

HUGO

(Quietly) Indeed.

HALLIE

I'm going to go get you a hotdog.

She gets up to go.

HUGO

You are very kind.

HALLIE

What would you like on it?

HUGO

It doesn't matter.

HALLIE

You sure?

HUGO

Quite sure, thank you.

HALLIE

I'll be right back.

HALLIE runs offstage. HUGO looks around himself once more, seemingly content.

HUGO

What a beautiful day to say goodbye.

He smiles softly. His eyes close, and his head drops, as if he has fallen asleep. A moment passes. He appears to be dozing when HALLIE runs back onstage.

HALLIE

I got it plain for you. These kind are really good, I've had them before . . .

She looks at HUGO.

Hugo? Hugo? Wake up . . . Hugo?

She gives his shoulder a shake. He doesn't move. She stands, staring at him. Lights fade.