A hot, sticky Sunday afternoon in June. A main thoroughfare with the Terminal Department Store in the background. Crowds of people passing back and forth. (It is best not to attempt to represent this realistically.) A young man and a young woman sit on the sidewalk curb at stage center front about three yards apart. They are hippies. They stare vacantly ahead, completely indifferent to their surroundings, with withdrawn expressions. (If desired, they can be shown sniffing glue.)

All of a sudden a stick comes hurtling down from the sky. A very ordinary stick, about four feet long. (It can be manipulated, perhaps in the manner of Grand Guignol, by the actor playing the part of the man before he turned into a stick.)

The stick rolls over and over, first striking against the edge of the sidewalk, then bouncing back with a clatter, and finally coming to rest horizontally in the gutter near the curbstone, less than a yard from the two hippies. Reflex action makes them look at where the stick has fallen, then upward, frowning, to see where it came from. But considering the danger to which they have been exposed, their reactions are somewhat lacking in urgency.

MAN FROM HELL enters from stage left and WOMAN FROM HELL from stage right. Both are spotlighted.
HIPPIE BOY (Still looking up.) Goddamned dangerous.
MAN FROM HELL In the twilight a white crescent moon, A fruit knife peeling the skin of fate.
WOMAN FROM HELL Today, once again, a man Has changed his shape and become a stick.
HIPPIE BOY (Turns his gaze back to the stick and picks it up.) Just a couple of feet closer and it would have finished me.
HIPPIE GIRL (Looks at the stick and touches it.) Which do you suppose is the accident—when something hits you or when it misses?
HIPPIE BOY How should I know? (Bangs the stick on the pavement, making a rhythm.)
MAN FROM HELL The moon, the color of dirty chromium plate, Looks down and the streets are swirling.
WOMAN FROM HELL Today, once again, a man Turned into a stick and vanished.
HIPPIE GIRL Hey, what's that rhythm you're tapping?
HIPPIE BOY Try and guess.
HIPPIE GIRL (Glancing up.) Look! I'm sure that kid was the culprit!
HIPPIE BOY (Intrigued, looks up.)
HIPPIE GIRL Isn't he cute? I'll bet he's still in grade school. He must've been playing on the roof.
HIPPIE BOY (Looks into the distance, as before.) Damned brats. I hate them all.
HIPPIE GIRL Ohh—it's dangerous, the way he's leaning over the edge...I'm sure he's ashamed now he threw it...He seems to be trying to say something, but I can't hear him.
HIPPIE BOY He's probably disappointed nobody got hurt, so now he's cursing us instead.
STICK (To himself.) No, that's not so. He's calling me. The child saw me fall.
HIPPIE GIRL (Abruptly changing the subject.) I know what it is, that rhythm. This is the song, isn't it? (She hums some tune or other.)
HIPPIE BOY Hmm.
HIPPIE GIRL Was I wrong?
HIPPIE BOY It's always been my principle to respect other people's tastes.
HIPPIE GIRL (Unfazed by this, she wiggles her body to the rhythm and goes on humming.)

(In the meantime, THE MAN WHO TURNED INTO A STICK is coordinating the movements of his body with those of the stick in HIPPIE BOY's hand, all the while keeping his eyes fastened on a point somewhere in the sky.)
MAN FROM HELL (Walks slowly toward stage center.) The moon is forgotten

In a sky the color of cement, And the stick lies forgotten Down in the gutter.
WOMAN FROM HELL (Also walks in the same deliberate fashion toward stage center.) The stick lies forgotten in the gutter, The streets from above form a whirlpool. A boy is searching for his vanished father.

(MAN and WOMAN FROM HELL meet at stage center, several feet behind HIPPIE BOY and GIRL, just as they finish this recitation.)
MAN FROM HELL (In extremely matter-of-fact tones.) You know, it wouldn't surprise me if this time we happened to have arrived exactly where we intended.
WOMAN FROM HELL (Opens a large notebook.) The time is precisely twenty-two minutes and ten seconds before—
MAN FROM HELL (Looks at his wristwatch.) On the button....
WOMAN FROM HELL (Suddenly notices the stick in HIPPIE BOY'S hand.) I wonder, could that be the stick?
MAN FROM HELL (Rather perplexed.) If it is, we've got a most peculiar obstacle in our path.... (Walks up to HIPPIE BOY and addresses him from behind, over his shoulder.) Say, pal, where did you get that stick?
HIPPIE BOY (Roughly.) I wonder, could that be the stick?
WOMAN FROM HELL (Abruptly changing the subject.) I knew it! (To MAN FROM HELL.) Sir, it was this stick, as I suspected.
HIPPIE BOY (To HIPPIE GIRL.) Sorry to bother you, but would you mind handing me that stick?
WOMAN FROM HELL No, not exactly....
MAN FROM HELL (Interrupting.) But you're not too far off....
HIPPIE BOY Liars! You're the ones who threw the stick at us. And now you're trying to suppress the evidence. You think I'm going to play your game? Fat chance!

(Beat out a rhythm with the stick, he starts to hum the melody HIPPIE GIRL was singing.)
MAN FROM HELL (In mollifying tones.) If you really suspect us, I'd be glad to go with you to the police station.
HIPPIE BOY Don't try to wheedle your way around me.
HIPPY GIRL: (Looks up.) You know, I think it was that kid we saw a while ago... He’s not there anymore.

HIPPY BOY: You shut up.

WOMAN FROM HELL: (Animatedly.) That’s right, there was a child watching everything, wasn’t there? From the railing up there on the roof... And didn’t you hear him calling his father? In a frightened, numb little voice..."

HIPPY GIRL: (Trying not to annoy HIPPY BOY.) How could I possibly hear him?

The average noise level in this part of town is supposed to be over 120 decibels, on an average. (Shaking her body to a go-go rhythm.)

WOMAN FROM HELL: (To MAN FROM HELL.) Sir, shall I verify the circumstances at the scene?

MAN FROM HELL: Yes, I suppose so. (Hesitates a second.)... But don’t waste too much time over it.

(WOMAN FROM HELL hurries off to stage left.)

STICK: (To himself. His voice is filled with anguish.) There’s no need for it... I can hear everything... In the grimy little office behind the staircase marked “For store employees only”... my son, scared to death, surrounded by scabby-looking, mean security guards..."

MAN FROM HELL: (To HIPPY BOY.) It’s kind of hard to explain, but the fact is, we have been entrusted, for the time being, with the custodianship of that stick... I wish you’d try somehow to understand.

HIPPY BOY: I don’t understand nothing.

HIPPY GIRL: (With a wise look.) This is the age of the generation gap. We’re alienated.

STICK: (To himself. In tones of unshakable grief.) The child is lodging a complaint... He says I turned into a stick and dropped from the roof..."

MAN FROM HELL: (To HIPPY BOY.) Well, let me ask you a simple question. What do you intend to use the stick for? I’m sure you haven’t any particular aim in mind.

HIPPY BOY: I’m not interested in aims.

HIPPY GIRL: That’s right. Aims are out-of-date.

MAN FROM HELL: Exactly. Aims don’t amount to a hill of beans. So why can’t you let me have it? It isn’t doing you any good. All it is is a stick of wood. But, as far as we’re concerned, it is a valuable item of evidence relating to a certain person..."

HIPPY GIRL: (Dreamily.) But one should have a few. People don’t have enough..."

MAN FROM HELL: Enough what?

HIPPY GIRL: Aims!

MAN FROM HELL: You’re making too much of nothing. It’s bad for your health to want something that doesn’t really exist. The uncertainty you feel at the thought you haven’t got any aims, your mental anguish at the thought you have lost track of whatever aims you once had—they’re a lot better proof that you are there, in that particular spot, than any aim I can think of. That’s true, isn’t it?

HIPPY GIRL: (To HIPPY BOY.) How about a kiss, huh?

HIPPY BOY: (Gives her a cold sidelong glance.) I don’t feel like it.

HIPPY GIRL: You don’t have to put on such airs with me.

HIPPY BOY: I don’t want to.

HIPPY GIRL: Come on!

HIPPY BOY: I told you, lay off the euphoria.

HIPPY GIRL: Then scratch my back.

HIPPY BOY: Your back?

( HIPPY GIRL bends over in HIPPY BOY’S direction, and lifts the back of her collar. HIPPY BOY, with an air of great reluctance, thrusts the stick down into her collar and moves the stick around inside her dress, scratching her back.)

HIPPY GIRL: You don’t mean it from the heart... (All the same, she immediately gives way and thrusts the stick down the back of HIPPY BOY’S collar.) Is this the place?

HIPPY BOY: Yes, there. And everywhere else.

HIPPY GIRL: Everywhere?

HIPPY BOY: (Twisting his body and emitting strange noises.) Uhh... uhh... uhh... It feels like I haven’t had a bath in quite some time...

HIPPY GIRL: (Throwing down the stick.) You egoist!

(MAN FROM HELL nimbly jumps between the two of them and attempts to grab the stick. But HIPPY BOY brushes his hand away and picks up the stick again.)

MAN FROM HELL: Look, my friend. I’m willing to make a deal with you. How much will you charge for letting me have this stick?

HIPPY GIRL: (Instantly full of life.) One dollar.

MAN FROM HELL: A dollar? For a stick of wood like this?

HIPPY BOY: Forget it. Not even for two dollars.

HIPPY GIRL: (To HIPPY BOY in a low voice, reproachfully.) You can find any number of sticks just like this one, if you really want it.

MAN FROM HELL: A dollar will keep you in cigarettes for a while. Me and this stick, we understand each other... Don’t know why.

HIPPY GIRL: (With scorn in her voice.) You look alike. A remarkable resemblance.

HIPPY BOY: (Staring at the stick.) So we look alike, do we? Me and this stick?
(Reflects awhile, then suddenly turns to HIPPIE GIRL.) You got any brothers and sisters?

HIPPIE GIRL A younger sister.
HIPPIE BOY What was her name for you? (HIPPIE GIRL hesitates.) You must have been known as something. A nickname, maybe.
HIPPIE GIRL You mean, the way she called me.
HIPPIE BOY Precisely.
HIPPIE GIRL Gaa-gaa.
HIPPIE BOY Gaa-gaa?
HIPPIE GIRL No, that's what my brother called me. My sister was different. She called me Mosquito.
HIPPIE BOY Yesterday there was a funeral at that haberdashery across the street.
HIPPIE GIRL (Looking around at the crowd.) But it had nothing to do with any of these people, had it?
HIPPIE BOY But what about Gaa-gaa and Mosquito?
MAN FROM HELL Wasn't it Gar-gar rather than Gaa-gaa?
HIPPIE GIRL She died.
MAN FROM HELL Who died?
HIPPIE GIRL My sister.
MAN FROM HELL What happened to her?
HIPPIE BOY She became a corpse, naturally.
MAN FROM HELL Of course. That's not surprising.
HIPPIE GIRL That's why I don't understand anything anymore. Everything is wrapped in riddles.
HIPPIE BOY What, for instance?
HIPPIE GIRL Was it Gaa-gaa or Gar-gar?
HIPPIE BOY You're just plain stupid.
MAN FROM HELL By the way, in reference to that stick—she says you look like it. Let's suppose for the moment you do look like the stick—the meaning is not what you think it is.
HIPPIE GIRL Tomorrow people will be calling tomorrow today.
MAN FROM HELL To begin with, your conceptual framework with respect to the stick is basically—
HIPPIE BOY I see. Once a human hand grabs something there's no telling what it can do.

HIPPIE GIRL I missed grabbing it. It's too awful to think that the day after tomorrow will always be tomorrow even hundreds of years from now.

(WOMAN FROM HELL returns, walking quickly.)

WOMAN FROM HELL (She stops at some distance from the others.) Sir . . .
MAN FROM HELL (Goes up to WOMAN.) Well, what happened?
WOMAN FROM HELL We've got to hurry . . .
MAN FROM HELL (Turns toward HIPPIES.) This crazy bunch—I offered them a dollar for the stick, but they refuse to part with it.
WOMAN FROM HELL The child is coming.
MAN FROM HELL What for?
WOMAN FROM HELL Just as I got into the department store I heard them making an announcement about a lost child. The child was apparently raising quite a rumpus. He claimed he saw his father turn into a stick and fall off the roof. But nobody seemed to believe him.
MAN FROM HELL Of course not.
WOMAN FROM HELL Then the child gave the matron the slip and ran out of the store, looking for his father.

(MAN and WOMAN FROM HELL look uneasily off to stage left.)

STICK (Talking brokenly to himself.) The child saw it. I know he did. I was leaning against the railing at the time, the one that runs between the air ducts and the staircase, on a lower level. I was looking down at the crowds below, with nothing particular on my mind. A whirlpool . . . Look—it's just like one big whirlpool . . .

(Actual noises of city traffic gradually swell in volume, sounding something like a monster howling into a tunnel. Suddenly HIPPIE BOY lets the stick drop in alarm.)

HIPPIE GIRL What happened?
STICK (Continuing his monologue.) I stood there, feeling dizzy, as if the noises of the city were a waterfall roaring over me, clutching tightly to the railing, when my boy called me. He was pestering me for a dime, so he could look through the telescope for three minutes . . . And that second my body sailed out into mid-air . . . I had not the least intention of running away from the child or anything like that . . . But I turned into a stick . . . Why did it happen? Why should such a thing have happened to me?
HIPPIE GIRL What's the matter, anyway?
HIPPIE BOY (Stares at the stick lying at his feet with a bewildered expression.) It twitched, like a dying fish . . .
HIPPIE GIRL It couldn't have . . . You're imagining things.
WOMAN FROM HELL (Stands on tiptoes and stares off into the distance at stage left.)
Look! Sir, look! Do you see that child? The little boy with the short neck, prowling around, looking with his big glasses over the ground?

**MAN FROM HELL** He seems to be gradually coming closer.

**STICK** (To himself.) I can hear the child’s footsteps . . . bouncing like a little rubber ball, the sound threading its way through the rumblings of the earth shaking under the weight of a million people . . .

**HIPPIE GIRL** (Steals a glance in the direction of the MAN and WOMAN FROM HELL.) Somehow those guys give me the creeps . . . Why don’t you make some sort of deal with him?

(MAN who has kept his eyes glued on the stick at his feet, snaps out of his daze and stands up. GIRL also stands.)

**HIPPIE BOY** (With irritation.) I can’t figure it out, but I don’t like it. That stick looks too much like me.

**HIPPIE GIRL** (Her expression is consoling.) It doesn’t really look all that much like you. Just a little.

**HIPPIE BOY** (Calls to MAN FROM HELL, who has just that moment turned toward him, as if anticipating something.) Five dollars. What do you say? (He keeps his foot on the stick.)

**MAN FROM HELL** Five dollars?

**STICK** (To himself.) He doesn’t have to stand on me . . . I’m soaked from lying in the gutter . . . I’ll be lucky if I don’t catch a cold.

**HIPPIE BOY** I’m not going to force you, if you don’t want it.

**WOMAN FROM HELL** (Nervously glancing off to stage left.) Sir, he’s almost here.

(THE MAN WHO TURNED INTO A STICK shows a subtle, complex reaction, a mixture of hope and rejection.)

**HIPPIE BOY** I’m selling it because I don’t want to sell it. That’s a contradiction of circumstances. Do you follow me?

**HIPPIE GIRL** That’s right. He’s selling it because he doesn’t want to. Can you understand that?

**MAN FROM HELL** (Annoyed.) All right, I guess . . . (He pulls some bills from his pocket and selects from them a five-dollar bill.) Here you are . . . But I’ll tell you one thing, my friend, you may imagine you’ve struck a clever bargain, but one of these days you’ll find out. It wasn’t just a stick you sold, but yourself.

(But HIPPIE BOY, without waiting for MAN to finish his words, snatches away the five-dollar bill and quickly exits to stage right. HIPPIE GIRL follows after him, smiling innocently. She waves her hand.)

**HIPPIE GIRL** It’s the generation gap. (She exits with these words.)

(MAN and WOMAN FROM HELL, leaping into action, rush to the gutter where the stick is lying. Just then the sun suddenly goes behind a cloud, and the street noises gradually fade. At the very end, for just a second, a burst of riveting is heard from a construction site somewhere off in the distance.)

**MAN FROM HELL** (Gingerly picks up the dirty stick with his fingertips. With his other hand he takes the newspaper that can be seen protruding from his pocket, spreads it open, and uses it to wipe the stick.) Well, that was a close one . . .

**WOMAN FROM HELL** Earth duty isn’t easy, is it?

**MAN FROM HELL** It was a good experience on your first day of on-the-job training.

**WOMAN FROM HELL** I was on tenterhooks, I can tell you.

(THE MAN WHO TURNED INTO A STICK suddenly exhibits a strong reaction to something. MAN and WOMAN FROM HELL alertly respond to his reaction.)

**WOMAN FROM HELL** There’s the child!

(MAN FROM HELL, greatly alarmed, at once hides the stick behind his back. On a sudden thought, he pushes the stick under his jacket, and finally down into his trousers. He stands ramrod stiff for several seconds. Then, all at once, the excitement melts from the face of the MAN WHO TURNED INTO A STICK. MAN and WOMAN FROM HELL, relieved, also relax their postures.)

**STICK** (To himself.) It doesn’t matter . . . There was nothing I could have done, anyway, was there?

**MAN FROM HELL** (Pulling out the stick.) Wow! That was a close shave . . .

**WOMAN FROM HELL** But you know, I kind of feel sorry for him.

**MAN FROM HELL** Sympathy has no place in our profession. Well, let’s get cracking. (Holds out the stick.) That crazy interruption has certainly played havoc with our schedule.

**WOMAN FROM HELL** (Accepts the stick and holds it in both hands, as if to make a ceremonial offering.) I didn’t realize how light it was.

**MAN FROM HELL** It couldn’t be better for a first tryout. Now, make your report, in exactly the order you learned . . .

**WOMAN FROM HELL** Yes, sir. (Examines the stick from every angle, with the earnestness of a young intern.) The first thing I notice is that a distinction may be observed between the top and bottom of this stick. The top is fairly deeply enfeebled with dirt and grease from human hands. Note, on the other hand, how rubbed and scraped the bottom is . . . I interpret this as meaning that the stick has not always been lying in a ditch, without performing any useful function, but that during its lifetime it was employed by people for some particular purpose.

**STICK** (To himself. Angrily.) That’s obvious, isn’t it? It’s true of everybody.

**WOMAN FROM HELL** But it seems to have suffered rather harsh treatment. The poor thing has scars all over it . . .

**MAN FROM HELL** (Laughs.) Excellent! But what do you mean by calling it a poor thing? I’m afraid you’ve been somewhat infected by human ideas.
WOMAN FROM HELL Infected by human ideas?
MAN FROM HELL We in hell have a different approach. To our way of thinking, this stick, which has put up with every kind of abuse, until its whole body is covered with scars, never running away and never being discarded, should be called a capable and faithful stick.
WOMAN FROM HELL Still, it’s only a stick. Even a monkey can make a stick do what he wants. A human being with the same qualities would be simple-minded.
MAN FROM HELL (Emphatically.) That’s precisely what I meant when I said it was capable and faithful. A stick can lead a blind man, and it can also train a dog. As a lever it can move heavy objects, and it can be used to thrash an enemy. In short, the stick is the root and source of all tools.
WOMAN FROM HELL But with the same stick you can beat me and I can beat you back.
MAN FROM HELL Isn’t that what faithfulness means? A stick remains a stick, no matter how it is used. You might almost say that the etymology of the word faithful is a stick.
WOMAN FROM HELL (Unconvinced.) But what you’re saying is too—miserable.
MAN FROM HELL All it boils down to is, a living stick has turned into a dead stick—right? Sentimentality is forbidden to Earth Duty personnel. Well, continue with your analysis. (WOMAN REMAINS SILENT.) What’s the matter now? I want the main points of your report!
WOMAN FROM HELL (PULLING HERSELF TOGETHER.) Yes, sir. Next I will telephone headquarters and inform them of the exact time and place of the disappearance. (REQUEST VERIFICATION OF A CERTIFICATION NUMBER.) Me 621. Now you’re on the right track!
WOMAN FROM HELL The only thing I have to do is verify the certification number. It won’t be necessary to register the punishment.
MAN FROM HELL Do you remember what it says in our textbook? “They were judged and killed for not being sticks. They who were judged but not killed have turned into sticks and filled the earth. The Master has departed, and the earth has become a grave of rotten sticks.” That’s why the shortage of help in hell has never become especially acute.
MAN FROM HELL (TAKES OUT A WALKIE-TALKIE.) Shall I call headquarters?
MAN FROM HELL (TAKES THE WALKIE-TALKIE FROM HER.) I’ll show you how it’s done, just the first time. (SWITCHES IT ON.) Hello, headquarters? This is MC training squad on earth duty.
VOICE FROM HELL Roger. Headquarters here.
MAN FROM HELL Request verification of a certification number. MC 621.
VOICE FROM HELL MC 621. Roger.
MAN FROM HELL The time was twenty-two minutes ten seconds before the hour . . . The place was Ward B, thirty-two stroke four on the grid. Stick fell from the roof of Terminal Department Store . . .
VOICE FROM HELL Roger. Go ahead.
MAN FROM HELL No punishment. Registration unnecessary. Over.
VOICE FROM HELL Roger. Registration unnecessary.
MAN FROM HELL Request information on next assignment.
VOICE FROM HELL Six minutes twenty-four seconds from now, in Ward B, thirty-two stroke eight on the grid. Over.
WOMAN FROM HELL (OPEN HER NOTEBOOK AND JOTS DOWN A MEMO.) That would make it somewhere behind the station . . .
MAN FROM HELL Roger. Thirty-two stroke eight.
VOICE FROM HELL Good luck on your mission. Over.
MAN FROM HELL Roger. Thanks a lot. (SUDDENLY CHANGING HIS TONE.) I’m sorry to bother you, but if my wife comes over, would you mind telling her I forgot to leave the key to my locker?
VOICE FROM HELL (WITH A CLICK OF THE TONGUE.) You’re hopeless. Well, this is the last time. Over.
MAN FROM HELL (LAUGHS.) Roger. So long. (TURNS OFF WALKIE-TALKIE.) That, in general, is how to do it.
WOMAN FROM HELL Thank you. I think I understand now.
MAN FROM HELL What’s the matter? You look kind of down in the mouth.
WOMAN FROM HELL (BARELY MANAGES A SMILE.) It’s nothing, really . . .

10 / Kobo Abe

WOMAN FROM HELL Yes, I remember now . . . Probably it’ll be all right if I leave the stick as it was during its lifetime, without any special punishment.
MAN FROM HELL Now you’re on the right track!
MAN FROM HELL Well, shall we say good-bye to our stick somewhere around here?

WOMAN FROM HELL You mean you're going to throw it away, just like that?

MAN FROM HELL Of course. That's the regulation. (Looks around, discovers a hole in the gutter, and stands the stick in it.) If I leave it standing this way it'll attract attention and somebody is sure to pick it up before long. (Takes a step back and examines it again.) It's a handy size and, as sticks go, it's a pretty good specimen. It could be used for the handle of a placard.

(WOMAN suddenly takes hold of the stick and pulls it from the hole.)

MAN FROM HELL What do you think you're doing?

WOMAN FROM HELL It's too cruel!

MAN FROM HELL Cruel? (He is too dumbfounded to continue.)

WOMAN FROM HELL We should give it to the child. Don't you think that's the least we can do? As long as we're going to get rid of it, anyway . . .

MAN FROM HELL Don't talk nonsense. A stick is nothing more than a stick, no matter who has it.

WOMAN FROM HELL But it's something special to that child.

MAN FROM HELL Why?

WOMAN FROM HELL At least it ought to serve as a kind of mirror. He can examine himself and make sure he won't become a stick like his father.

MAN FROM HELL (Bursts out laughing.) Examine himself! Why should anyone who's satisfied with himself do that?

WOMAN FROM HELL Was this stick satisfied with himself?

MAN FROM HELL Don't you see, it was precisely because he was so satisfied that he turned into a stick?

WOMAN FROM HELL (Stares at stick. A short pause.) Just supposing this stick could hear what we have been saying . . .

STICK (To himself, Weakly.) Of course I can hear. Every last word.

MAN FROM HELL I have no specific information myself, since it's quite outside my own specialty, but scholars in the field have advanced the theory that they can in fact hear what we are saying.

WOMAN FROM HELL How do you suppose he feels to hear us talk this way?

MAN FROM HELL Exactly as a stick would feel, naturally. Assuming, of course, that sticks have feelings . . .

WOMAN FROM HELL Satisfied?

MAN FROM HELL (With emphasis.) There's no room for arguments. A stick is a stick. That simple fact takes precedence over problems of logic. Come, now, put the stick back where it was. Our next assignment is waiting for us.

(WOMAN FROM HELL, with a compassionate expression, gently returns STICK to the hole in the gutter. THE MAN WHO TURNED INTO A STICK up until this point has been registering various shades of reaction to the conversation of MAN and WOMAN, but from now on his emotions are petrified into an immobile state between fury and despair.

STICK (To himself.) Satisfied . . .

WOMAN FROM HELL But why must we go through the motions of whipping a dead man this way?

MAN FROM HELL We are not particularly concerned with the dead. Our job is to record their lives accurately. (Lowering his voice.) To tell the truth, it is extremely dubious whether or not we in fact exist.

WOMAN FROM HELL What do you mean by that?

MAN FROM HELL There is a theory that we are no more than the dreams that people have when they are on the point of death.

WOMAN FROM HELL If those are dreams, they are horrible nightmares.

MAN FROM HELL That's right.

WOMAN FROM HELL Then there's no likelihood that they're satisfied. To have nightmares even though you're satisfied—that's a terrible contradiction, isn't it?

MAN FROM HELL Perhaps it might be described as the moment of doubt that follows satisfaction. In any case, what's done is done . . . (In tones meant to cheer woman.) We'll have to hurry. We have exactly three minutes. If we're late there'll be all hell to pay later on . . . (Starts walking, leading the way.) Don't worry. You'll get used to it, before you know it. I was the same way myself. Sometimes you get confused by the false fronts people put on. But once you realize that a stick was a stick, even while it was alive . . .

WOMAN FROM HELL (Still turns to look back at STICK, but somewhat more cheerful now.) Is the next person going to be a stick, too?

MAN FROM HELL Mmm. It would be nice if we got something more unusual this time.

WOMAN FROM HELL What do you suppose those kids who tried to keep us from getting the stick will turn into?

MAN FROM HELL Those hippies?

WOMAN FROM HELL They didn't seem much like sticks, did they?

MAN FROM HELL If they don't turn into sticks maybe they'll become rubber hoses.

(MAN and WOMAN FROM HELL exit to stage right.)

STICK (To himself.) Satisfied? Me? Stupid fools. Would a satisfied man run away from his own child and jump off a roof?

(In another section of the stage MAN and WOMAN FROM HELL reappear as silhouettes.)

MAN FROM HELL The sky is the color of a swamp, cloudy with disinfectant. On the cold, wet ground Another man has changed into a stick.
WOMAN FROM HELL He has been verified but not registered.
He is shut up inside the shape of a stick.
He is not unlucky, so he must be happy.
STICK (To himself.) I've never once felt satisfied. But I wonder what it would
be better to turn into, rather than a stick. The one thing somebody in the
world is sure to pick up is a stick.
MAN FROM HELL He has been verified but not registered.
The man's been shut up inside the shape of a stick.
He can't so much as move anymore, and that's a problem.
WOMAN FROM HELL Supposing he begins to itch somewhere—
What'll he do? How will he fare?
MAN FROM HELL I'm afraid a stick would probably lack
The talent needed to scratch his own back.
WOMAN FROM HELL But anyway, you mustn't mind,
You're not the only one of your kind.
MAN FROM HELL (Steps forward and points his finger around the audience.) Look
—there's a whole forest of sticks around you. All those innocent people,
each one determined to turn into a stick slightly different from everybody
else, but nobody once thinking of turning into anything besides a stick.
. . . All those sticks. You may never be judged, but at least you don't have
to worry about being punished. (Abruptly changes his tone and leans farther
out toward the audience.) You know, I wouldn't want you to think I'm
saying these things just to annoy you. Surely, you don't suppose I would
be capable of such rudeness. . . . Heaven forbid. . . . (Forces a smile.) It's
just the simple truth, the truth as I see it. . . .
WOMAN FROM HELL (Goes up to the man who turned into a stick and speaks
in pleading, rather jerky phrases.) Yes, that's right. You're not alone. You've
lots of friends . . . men who turned into sticks.
Curtain.

EDWARD ALBEE

Finding the Sun

Finding the Sun was written (and copyrighted) in 1983, to satisfy a
commission from the University of Northern Colorado. It was first performed
there that year, directed by the author (me). It was subsequently performed at
the University of California-Irvine (same director) and at the University of
Houston (ibid).

I was making plans for a New York production of the play in 1987 when
Tina Howe's Coastal Disturbances (written or at least copyrighted in 1987)
opened off-Broadway. By bizarre coincidence, Miss Howe's play shares a beach
setting with Finding the Sun, a not dissimilar group of characters and—
inevitably—some of the same general preoccupations.

But instinct told me that while the two plays were independent conceptions
Miss Howe's had occupied the field—or the beach, to be more exact—and, should
mine be then presented some cloudy journalistic minds would deduce that the
earlier play (mine) had been substantially influnced by the later one (Miss
Howe's).

Life is tough enough these days without any of that nonsense, so I have
postponed New York production of Finding the Sun for a while, at least until
the sea air clears.

I publish it here with pleasure, however, for I am quite proud of it; further,
with both texts now available the interested play reader will discover that Miss
Howe's play and mine are, in the end, quite different matters.

CHARACTERS

ABRAHAM Twenty-three; mousy brown/blond hair, pinched features; not
tall; thin; not pretty, but not plain.

BENJAMIN Thirty; blond, willowy-handsome; medium height.

CORDelia Twenty-eight; attractive in a cold way; dark or raven hair;
tall; good figure.