

Manhole

The play is to be performed with a stage trapdoor or wherever there's an appropriate open manhole.

Moan of a foghorn. (The foghorn repeats every two minutes during play.)

ROLF and ERIKA, a married couple, enter. They are tourists, bundled in warm jackets, walking in dense, morning fog. Each carries a small, white paper bag and a to-go coffee cup. ROLF is ten paces ahead of ERIKA.

Where are we going? ERIKA

Silence.

Rolf! ERIKA

ROLF stops.

You don't have to yell. I'm right here. ROLF

I can't see you for nothing. ERIKA

ERIKA catches up.

Pea soup. ROLF

What pea soup? ERIKA

ROLF

What this fog is called.

ERIKA

Pea soup is green. This is gray.

ROLF

(firm)

It's not the color, it's the density. Thick as pea soup.

ERIKA

My coffee's getting cold.

ROLF

(perturbed)

You wanted to get close to the water. So....

He walks around.

ROLF

Here. We can sit by these pilings.

They sit. ERIKA sips her coffee.

ERIKA

Not the day to go sightseeing.

Silence. Rolf slurps his coffee.

ERIKA

How are we going to find our way back?

ROLF

It'll lift.

ERIKA

And if it doesn't, *weatherman?*

Silence.

ERIKA scoffs, opens her bag.

ERIKA

What's this? A blueberry muffin? Where's my croissant?

ROLF hears a distant call.

ROLF

Did you hear something?

ERIKA

Oh great. They screwed up my order. Idiots!

ROLF

Erika, be quiet a second.

ERIKA

What'd you get?

There's a distant voice, hoarse and pained.

MAN

Hey up there!

ROLF

There it is again.

ERIKA takes ROLF'S bag, opens it, unwraps croissant.

ERIKA

You got mine.

ROLF

Shh! Listen... *(gestures)* there's somebody.

ERIKA

Who somebody? *(takes bite)*

Help me!

MAN

There. That! Somebody's calling.

ROLF

Mmm, this sourdough is soo flaky and soo good.

ERIKA

ROLF stands. Looks around.

Hello?

ROLF

Help me, please!

MAN

What are you doing?

ERIKA

Somebody needs help... *(listens)*

ROLF

I don't hear anyone.

ERIKA

If you'd shut up. Listen...!

ROLF

You shut up!

ERIKA

ROLF crosses stage/street.

Hello...?

ROLF

I'm over here.

MAN

Where are you going? ERIKA

Over where? ROLF

ERIKA stands. Shouts with a mouth full of croissant.

Rolf! Get back here! ERIKA

You hear him? ROLF

Could be a trap! ERIKA
(fearful)

ROLF stops.

What do you want? ROLF

I need help! MAN

ERIKA follows ROLF'S voice.

Rolf! Rolf, don't! ERIKA

Where...? I still can't... ROLF

Watch your step! MAN

ROLF sees a round shadow emerge at his feet. He almost falls head over heels into a manhole.

Oh! Jeez!

ROLF

I said watch out.

MAN

Rolf!

ERIKA

It's okay. I'm okay.

ROLF
(to ERIKA)

I'm not. I'm stuck down here.

MAN

I can't see you.

ROLF

ERIKA approaches cautiously, carrying breakfast bag.

I'm back here.

ERIKA

Not you. There's a man in the ground.

ROLF

ROLF peers over the edge of the hole. The sewer stench bites his nostrils. He gags.

Awfff! *(to MAN)* What are you doing down there?

ROLF

I fell in. Will you help me?

MAN

ERIKA
(to ROLF)

There you are.

ROLF
(to MAN)

Hang on.

ROLF takes ERIKA aside by her elbow.

ROLF

Come here.

ERIKA

Dammit! You almost made me drop my croissant!

ROLF

Listen. There's a guy stuck down a manhole.

ERIKA

Working on the sewer?

ROLF

Says he fell in. Wants help to get out.

ERIKA

Don't believe it.

ROLF

I dunno...

ERIKA

What's he look like?

ROLF

Can't say. It's too dark.

ERIKA

I don't like this.

ROLF

See for yourself.

They go to the manhole.

ROLF

Watch your step.

ERIKA
(to MAN)

Hey, whoever you are.

MAN

Yeah, hello...?

ERIKA

We're not from here.

MAN

And I'm not from this manhole.

ERIKA

We're on vacation.

MAN

Are you going to help me?

ERIKA

Are you a city worker?

MAN

Would it change anything if I was?

ERIKA

Well, I can't see your face.

ERIKA leans over the hole, gags at the smell, backs away, ducks the croissant behind her as if the smell would contaminate it.

ERIKA

Oh god, that's vile!

MAN

You don't get used to it.

ERIKA and ROLF step away from the hole to talk.

ERIKA

Could be some kind of tourist scam.

ROLF

What? From a manhole? Don't be silly.

ERIKA

Of course, you would say that. No imagination.

ROLF

Okay, you want to get into it right here? Well, I don't.

ROLF walks back to manhole.

ERIKA

Where are you going? *(follows him)*

ROLF

To get more information.

MAN

People, why is this so hard? Just call 911.

ROLF

Can't do that. We don't have cell phones.

ERIKA

We're doing a Tech Addiction Cleanse. You know, no screens?

MAN

Of all the people...

ERIKA

Let me tell you. It's not easy. This is day three of withdrawals. I feel banished, like totally cut off from the living.

MAN

Know the feeling.

ERIKA

They say it gets easier.

ROLF

Why don't *you* call?

MAN

I tried. No signal. And my battery died. Is there anybody else around up there?

ERIKA

Hard to say.

ROLF

Nobody we can see or hear. Hang on.

ROLF walks off.

ROLF

HELLO! ANYBODY THERE?

ERIKA

(to MAN)

It's pea soup. Can't see your hand in front of your face.

MAN

I know.

ROLF

HEY! WE NEED HELP OVER HERE!

ERIKA

(nervous, making conversation)

We came to eat breakfast by the bay. We're on vacation.

MAN

You said that.

ROLF

A MAN NEEDS SOME HELP!

ERIKA

Well, it's more than that. We thought it'd be a good way to work on our marriage. You know, away from jobs and chores.

MAN

How's that going?

ERIKA

Pfft... it's tiresome, he's so stubborn... wait, why am I telling you this? I don't know you.

ROLF returns.

ERIKA

Anybody?

ROLF

No.

MAN

My legs are going numb.

ROLF

How long have you been down there?

MAN

Since last night.

ROLF

All night?

MAN

Took a walk to get some air. Clear my head. Didn't see that somebody ripped off the manhole cover.

ROLF

Lucky you didn't break your neck.

MAN

Cracked a couple of ribs, but yeah...

ERIKA

Why would anyone steal a manhole cover?

MAN

For scrap.

ROLF

I read something about that.

MAN

So, will you *help* me?

ERIKA

Has anyone else come by?

MAN

Yeah, but I spooked'em.

ERIKA

I get that.

(short pause)

MAN

Okay now I see two ways to play this. Either one of you goes for help. Find somebody with a phone. Or you reach down far as you can. I jump up, grab your hand. You help me climb out.

ROLF

Doesn't the sewer go somewhere you can get out.

MAN

It drains into the bay. But the pipe's small. You have to crawl. Hands and knees. It's dark as death and I couldn't breathe.

ERIKA

The city drains waste into the bay?

MAN

Or a treatment center. They let it out in the night, all I know.

ERIKA

Oh my god.

MAN

Words cannot describe. Thought I'd drown in it. Anyway, will you help me?

ERIKA

Rolf? Rolf, lets...

ROLF

What?

ERIKA
(to MAN)

Hang on, we need to think this out.

MAN

Think what?

ERIKA

Gimme a break, mister. We've never been in this situation before.

MAN

Oh, right. And I do this all the time.

ERIKA

Not funny.

ERIKA waves ROLF aside.

ERIKA
(to Rolf)

This is a set up. We're on some kind of gotcha reality TV show.

ROLF
With cameras that shoot through fog?

ERIKA
They've got night vision goggles, don't they?

ROLF
Don't be ridiculous.

MAN
People! You are *way* over-thinking this!

ERIKA whispers in ROLF'S ear. They return to manhole.

ROLF
(to MAN)

Before we agree to anything we want to know who you are.

MAN
What does it matter?

ERIKA
It matters a lot. What's your nationality?

MAN
Oh, so, you need to classify me. Okay. Let's see... I'm pansexual. I'm an atheist. I'm an illegal. I have a bomb strapped to my chest. Call me Ismael. I'm the son of God.

ERIKA
Smart ass.

MAN

Look, I'm a guy who's wet, cold and filthy. I smell like shit. My throat burns from shouting with cracked ribs. My legs are about to collapse. And I'm dying of thirst. Your turn. Who are you? Oh, right. You're a couple on vacation to repair their marriage.

ROLF

How'd he know that? *(stink-eyes ERIKA)* We agreed to keep that private!

MAN

Oops.

ROLF

(to ERIKA)

You just can't keep that mouth shut!

ERIKA

It's no big secret. So what if he...

ROLF

We agreed, the less people know, the fewer opinions we get. God!

ERIKA ignores him, circles the manhole, changes the subject.

ERIKA

(to MAN)

Okay, what do you do for a living?

MAN

I steal manhole covers.

ERIKA

(to ROLF)

There, see! He's gaming us!

MAN

Alright, alright, you want my ID? Here?

A wallet flies up out of the manhole and falls back down.

MAN

Oh-oh, now I did it.

ROLF

What's that?

MAN

My wallet... I can't... oh here it is. You ready now? Three... two... one... catch!

The man's wallet flies up out of the manhole dripping with sewage. ERIKA reacts.

ERIKA

Eew... yuck.

The wallet falls back into manhole uncaught.

Silence.

ROLF
(to ERIKA)

Hey?

ERIKA

What?

ROLF

Let's just do what he says.

ERIKA

Oh, so you're going to help him? Such a hypocrite. You won't help my brother when he gets in trouble, but you'll help some total stranger.

ROLF

Your brother's got choices. This guy's got none. I'm gonna find somebody with a phone.

ERIKA

You're not going to leave me alone with *him*.

ROLF

You aren't *with* him. You're up here. He's down ...

ERIKA

Yeah, and he's got a partner (*looks around*) waiting to pounce and throw me down the hole.

MAN

Oh my God.

ERIKA

(*to MAN*)

Just shows you have no idea what women go through!

ROLF

Then you go.

ERIKA

What? And how do I find my way back?

MAN

Drop croissant crumbs.

ERIKA holds her nose, leans over manhole, flips MAN the bird.

ROLF

What, you got a better idea?

ERIKA

Yes. We leave it to somebody else who comes along.

ROLF

We can't just walk away.

ERIKA

We sure as hell can. And if you stopped when I wanted to stop, we'd never know he was here. But no, you had to keep going. Always your way.

ROLF
(fuming)

Erikaaaa! This is not the time!

MAN
People! People! What's so complicated? Reach down, I'll jump up grab your hand.

ERIKA orbits the manhole.

ERIKA
You just don't register it, do you? You're a stranger. And these days you can't be too cautious.

MAN
Register?

ERIKA
Yeah.

MAN
So when do you let a stranger become a person?

ERIKA
When you can trust them.

MAN
Great. And if I said, "Trust me" would you?

ERIKA
No. Because you said, "trust me."

ROLF
What would you do?

MAN
What would I do?

ROLF

If you were up here.

MAN

I'd look at the slim, slim chance a serial killer or terrorist had fallen into a manhole and ...

ROLF

And ...

MAN

And I'd have a phone.

ERIKA

Oh, fuck you.

ROLF

Wasn't my idea.

ERIKA

Sure was! You said for us to work things out I had to leave my phone at home.

ROLF

That's because you're forever on the damn thing. But you insisted I leave mine. *(mimicking)* "Fairsie, fairsie."

MAN

What a pickle. Do you help the man or leave him to rot? Breaking news: karma doesn't take vacations.

ERIKA

Oh, so now he plays the karma card. *(holds nose, yells into hole)* You think you can guilt us, you're wrong, asshole!

ERIKA stamps around to other side of manhole.

MAN

Okay, when you find yourself stuck in a hole don't call me to help, you whiney, spineless, self-entitled ...

ROLF

You don't talk to my wife that way.

MAN

You do. Maybe not in words, but your tone.

ERIKA

He's right about that.

ROLF

Oh, so now we're taking sides?

The following mimicry overlaps to a crescendo as ERIKA and ROLF pace back and forth on opposite sides of the manhole.

ERIKA

But it's true. You have two voices: bark and grumble. (*mimic's ROLF'S voice*)
"That's ridiculous. Don't do you dare. Hmph. Not gonna happen ..."

ERIKA: "You don't know what you're talking about. Hmph. What did you do that for? Oh, that's so like you. Will you stop yammering!"

ROLF: Oh yeah, well you're talking all the time griping. (*Mimics ERIKA'S voice*) Now look what you made me do! There you go again. You're sick. Don't tell me what to do!"

MAN

People! People stop it! Just go!

ROLF and ERIKA stop talking.

ERIKA

What'd you say?

MAN

I said *go*. Both of you. Please. It'll be a relief.

ERIKA

You heard him. He gave us permission.

MAN

Come to find out Hell has a hell.

ERIKA

Bye-bye mister. *(to ROLF)* Okay, which way?

ROLF

I'm not talking to you!

ERIKA

So typical.

MAN has epiphany.

MAN

Way-way-wait! That's it! You wanted to know who I am? Well, I'll tell you. I'm your marriage. I'm the marriage you traveled all this way to fix. But that's not going to happen because to fix it means you'd have to own your shit. I've been with you all of ten minutes and I know some things. Like how you criticize each other instead of the situation you find yourselves in.

ROLF and ERIKA look at each other.

MAN

Hey Rolf, I bet you stopped listening to Erika years ago. I get it. But it's put you in a double bind. It stopped you from listening to your own feelings. Emotions are messy. They can't be controlled and you're all about control. But when you stuff them, you push yourself away. And once Erika presses a button, you're gone. But you get back. Oh yeah. By demeaning her. Treating her like she's stupid or irrelevant.

ERIKA

So true.

MAN

Not so fast, Erika. Needy, needy, Erika. All your whining sucks the life out of your marriage. Blame hides the truth, and your blamey, “You did this to me” victim pushes Rolf farther away. He probably puts in longer and longer work hours. Right? Does that ‘register’? And him gone makes you feel invisible, which pisses you off all the more. And the marry-go-round goes round and round.

ERIKA

We don’t have to listen to this.

MAN

Look, I could go all victimy here. Blame the dude who stole the manhole cover. Or thrash myself for drinking too much and going out at night in the fog. Neither one gives me freedom.

ERIKA

(to MAN)

Are you done?

MAN

Hey, I’m no couples therapist, but I know this: you want to save your marriage? You got to dive into the sewage you’re slinging, and it’s no different than what runs through this pipe.

Pause.

ERIKA

to ROLF)

We going?

They start to walk away. ROLF holds up.

ROLF

Wait. Dammit!

ERIKA

For what?

ROLF

He's got a point. *(pause)* I'm just saying... I mean, look at us... isn't this why...
ERIKA

Why we came.

ROLF

Yeah. And what happened? I mean we were ...

MAN

Like I said. I'm your marriage.

ERIKA

(to MAN)

You be quiet! *(to ROLF)* You were saying ... we were ...?

ROLF

Once. You know...

ERIKA

You mean when we got married?

ROLF

We aren't the ones we fell in love with, are we?

Pause.

ERIKA

(shakes head)

No...

ROLF

And what would they say if they saw us now?

Pause. Their 20-year-old selves appear and watch the scene unfold.

ERIKA

They'd say: "What happened to you two? You used to be sweet to each other. Affectionate."

ROLF

Yeah, and more adventurous ...

ERIKA

And more forgiving ...

ROLF

True.

ERIKA

We lost them ...

ROLF moves toward ERIKA.

ROLF

So how do we bring them back? I mean, they're still inside, right?

ERIKA

I don't know. Are they?

ROLF

They just got buried over time.

ERIKA

So what are you saying?

ROLF

I'm saying I want us to be those two people. I'm saying I'm sorry.

ERIKA

Like *sorry* sorry, or just sorry?

ROLF stretches out his arms to show openness.

ROLF

Sorry sorry. Clear through.

ERIKA x-rays him with suspicion.

ERIKA

Sorry for?

ROLF

For turning into such a controlling ass.

Pause.

ROLF keeps his arms extended. ERIKA hesitates, locks in on his eyes.

ERIKA

That's fair. I'm sorry too, for letting myself play into the "blamey victim."

*ROLF drops his arms. ROLF and ERIKA'S younger selves
Take each other's hand.*

ROLF

So, what can we do to bring them back?

ERIKA

We stop disappointing them.

ROLF

Okay. How about we start now.

ROLF reaches for ERIKA'S hand. She smiles, takes his hand.

ERIKA

Now's good.

*Sound of MAN clapping. Hearing him, ROLF and ERIKA
turn their eyes to manhole.*

ROLF

Would they leave him down there?

ERIKA

No. No they wouldn't. *to MAN*) Hey, you ready to try climbing out?

MAN

Thought you'd never ask.

ROLF lays flat on the ground. He reaches his hand into manhole as far as his arm will stretch. The stench is over-powering.

ROLF

Oof! Okay... see my hand?

MAN jumps, takes ROLF'S hand, but slips out.

ROLF

Noo!

ERIKA

What happened?

ROLF

Slipped out.

ERIKA hands him a napkin from breakfast bag.

ERIKA

Here, take this.

ROLF wipes his hand.

ROLF

(to MAN)

Let's go again. This time I'll try your wrist.

Again, MAN jumps up. ROLF latches onto his wrist. MAN'S weight pulls ROLF part way over the brink.

ROLF

Erika! My legs!

ERIKA kneels, grabs ROLF'S legs. They grunt and struggle to bring MAN out.

MAN

I'm slipping again ...

ROLF

Erika, hurry, over here ... see if you can reach his other hand.

ERIKA reaches over the edge, takes MAN'S left hand, has stench reaction.

ERIKA

Aw god!

Huffing and puffing, together they pull MAN out. He's wretchedly filthy from the chest down. ERIKA, ROLF and MAN lay on the ground catching their breath.

MAN is between tears and joy. He chuckles, holding his cracked ribs.

ERIKA and ROLF scramble to their feet.

MAN

You did it. You two did it.

MAN weakly stands. ERIKA and ROLF take a step back as MAN opens his arms to hug.

MAN

Come on.

ROLF

(waves him off)

That's alright.

ERIKA

No way I'm touching you.

MAN

You have to.

ROLF looks at ERIKA.

MAN

Come on, hug the muck.

ERIKA scowls as they all embrace.

They pull away, filthy.

ROLF and ERIKA'S younger selves step away arm in arm.

ERIKA and ROLF nod to MAN. They hand him a bag and cup of coffee, look around, then stride away in the direction of their younger selves.

MAN

Hey.

ROLF and ERIKA

Yeah?

MAN

Watch your step.

Lights dim. Moan of foghorn.

END