

# KOBO ABE

TRANSLATED FROM THE JAPANESE

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## *The Man Who Turned Into a Stick (death)*

### CHARACTERS

MAN FROM HELL *A supervisor.*

WOMAN FROM HELL *Recently appointed to the Earth Duty Squad.*

THE MAN WHO TURNED INTO A STICK

HIPPIE BOY

HIPPIE GIRL

VOICE FROM HELL

*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 They stare vacantly ahead, completely indifferent to their surroundings, with withdrawn expressions.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 AND HIPPIE GIRL SIDE

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.

~~WOMAN FROM HELL (*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 Hmmm.

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.*)

STOP

## STICK SIDE

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 refused 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.

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

## START

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 BOY~~ What's the matter, anyway?

## STOP

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.)*

## MAN AND WOMAN FROM HELL SIDE

*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 ten jobs, I can tell you.

*(THE MAN WHO TURNED INTO A STICK suddenly exhibits a strong reaction to something. MAN and WOMAN FROM HELL also 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?

START 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 encrusted 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.

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!

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 who came up for judgment, but were not judged, 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.

WOMAN 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. . . . I repeat, 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 (*Opens 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.

STOP

~~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. (*Returns walkie-talkie to WOMAN.*)

WOMAN FROM HELL (*Barely manages a smile.*) It's nothing, really . . .