

Ol' Man River

Khloe 45, once a free-spirit, contained. Lives on "Ash".
Max 26, cheeky and arrogant. Lives in his new boat "Winehouse".
May 18, a free-spirit, confident. Lives on "Ash".
Old Man 77, withered and carries a heavy weight. Lives on the worn boat.

Scene 1: Camden Canals, 2:05pm, January.

Three canal boats dock lazily next to one another; a promenade stretches in front of them and straight across the stage. The boats are tied to the bollards with thick rope. The boat SR is old, worn paint and its rope is covered in algae. The second boat CS, is named "Ash" she is ornate, well-looked after. Whilst the third SL is brand new, glossy paint and smaller than the others, she is called "Winehouse".

It's midday, a particularly grey day. Khloe stands CS on the promenade smoking, zoned out. Max emerges from "Winehouse" having just woken up.

Max: (Stretching) Fuck me.

Max rolls cigarette from his baggy coat pocket, but can't find a lighter.

Max: Shit. (Noticing Khloe) Hey, morning, hey would you mind lending us a lighter?

Khloe does not budge

Max: Excuse me, Khloe, (Clears throat) Khloe.

Max approaches the promenade

Max: Khloe, you got a/ light?

Khloe: /God! Jesus, sorry I wasn't with you. A light?

Max: Yeah please. If you don't/ mind.

Khloe: /Umm, let me, it's in one of these... /here.

Max: Ta.

Khloe hands over her lighter.

Khloe: You shouldn't you know, young man like you. It does awful things.

Max: Ha, don't I know. I should quit.

Khloe: Shouldn't we all.

Max: Aye.

Max lights his cigarette, hands the lighter back to Khloe and then makes his way back.

Max: Thanks.

Khloe: You know, I smoke about a sixty of these a day.

Max: You count as you go?

Khloe: God no, I work it out from the packets.

Max: Sixty?

Khloe: Yes about that.

Max: You know it's probably not, right?

Khloe: What?

Max: Sixty.

Khloe: What do you mean?

Max: I'm assuming that's packs of twenty?

Khloe: Yes...usually.

Max: Right, well sometimes there are nineteen in there, not twenty.
Khloe: What?
Max: It's some tax thing I think; they cheat you and take out a ciggy. That's why I roll usually. *(Slaps his pocket containing the tobacco)*.
Khloe: Nineteen?
Max: Yeah nineteen, some brands do it. Maybe they're saving money. They charge the same. Fucking shame if you ask me.
Khloe: That can't be true.
Max: My cousin told me, nineteen, it says it on the packet sometimes, small print mind.

Khloe brings out the cigarette packet, studies it.

Khloe: Well, bugger me nineteen. *(Shows the packet to Max)* Nineteen, there it is.
Max: Exactly. That's why I use roly's now.
Khloe: So it's...fifty-six a day I've been smoking. *(To self)* Huh, I've been cutting back all this time.
Max: When my cousin told me about the nineteen cigs, I went straight down to offy, asked for a box of twenty, got 'em, opened 'em, and there you had nineteen. I caught the shopkeeper out when she did it. I pulled her up over it and said "Excuse me I asked for twenty and you've sold me nineteen" and she just said, "Yes I know they're all like that now". What pissed me off was that she knew she was short selling me, but that she also lied. I mean, look, I don't think all brands are doing this cunt nineteen cigs deal, so I could've just gone with another pack, had she told me. There are other shops in Camden that are still doing the twenty mind. The fact that she don't, doesn't give her the right to say "They're all like that now" as that's clearly fucking bull. The bitch sold me nineteen for the price of twenty, that's why I use rollies now. You should count yours I bet there's nineteen.
Khloe: Well not anymore. *(Gesturing that she's already smoked some)*
Max: Oh yeah, right. Next pack then. I swear there'll be nineteen.
Khloe: *(Smiles)* I'll hold you to that Max.
Max: Aye do! *(Finishing his cigarette)* It's the fucking government. First it's bedroom tax, and then it's the NHS going; now it's nineteen cigs. They're taking everything.
Khloe: And that's not even the worst of it.
Max: I know, I can't even bring myself to say the words.
Khloe: They will always find a way to fuck you Max, they makes the rules.
Max: I bet they don't get nineteen either, I bet you they get fucking twenty.

Khloe laughs and Max withdraws into his boat. Khloe finishes her cigarette, and throws it on the ground. She brings out her pack, surveys it takes out a new cigarette

Khloe: *(To self)* Nineteen? If that he's telling the truth Tesco's got hell to pay.

She then lights it. Suddenly May opens up the window from within 'Ash'.

May: Hey, oi, where did you-

Khloe quickly snaps into focus

Khloe: Did you just oi me?
May: Where did you put my sunglasses?
Khloe: What sunglasses?
May: My nice ones.
Khloe: I don't know what your nice ones look like.
May: What do you mean?!
Khloe: Shut the window May you're getting the flies in.
May: You were wearing them the other day.
Khloe: Will you shut that window?
May: Yes, after I get my sunglasses back.
Khloe: Come out here and speak to me.
May: No, it's too bright, why do you think I need them?!

Khloe: I don't need this May.
May: Oh fucks sake it's always about you.
Khloe: Don't you fucking swear at me.

Old Man emerges from his boat and begins to hang up his washing, solemnly. And seems peeved by the noise, he never looks at the women arguing, his washing is his purpose.

May: I can do what I want I'm an adult.
Khloe: Yes that's right you are, and you should be able to look after your own things by now.

Khloe notices Old Man.

May: Well if someone wouldn't constantly knick my things I wouldn't have this/ problem.
Khloe: *(Whispered)* /May stop.
May: God, why won't you just let me move out/ I'm sick of being cramped in this boat.
Khloe: *(Whispered)* /Seriously, May, stop, stop it, shut up, May shut the hell up.

Khloe places finger on lips, Old Man continues with his washing.

May: *(Loudly)* What?!

Khloe subtly points in the direction of Old Man.

May: *(Whispered)* What?
Khloe: *(Whispered, looking at the Old Man)* It's him.

May quickly reacts, she shuts the window, runs out side onto the deck, Khloe joins her and they peak over to watch Old Man.

Khloe: Don't stare.
May: You're staring.
Khloe: I'm not, I'm blinking, see? *(Blinks)*
May: I just want to see what he looks like.
Khloe: You can look without staring.

Both Khloe and May observe him a little longer. Old Man is withered, weak and is slow in his dressing of the washing line. Both women watch him with different hunger; they've never seen him before.

May: I can't believe this.
Khloe: I know.
May: I'm going to say hello.

May rushes forward towards him, but Khloe pulls her back.

Khloe: No don't, we don't know anything about him.
May: What do you mean? We know he's a) Old and 2) owns a house-boat.
Khloe: Those are material May, that's not what I'm talking about. Just...wait...
Pause. Old Man hangs up his boxers.
May: 3) He wears underpants.
Khloe: May. Please.
May: What's your problem; he's just an Old Man.
Khloe: Who never comes out of his cabin apart from right now, isn't that a little weird?
May: He might have a good reason.
Khloe: I can't get a look at his face.
May: Me neither, should I throw something?
Khloe: No May, just-

Old Man turns to face them as he hangs up his socks.

Khloe: I recognise him.

May: Maybe he's a serial killer.

Khloe: May!

May: That explains how you'd know him.

Khloe: What the hell is that supposed to mean?

May: Err, you read the newspaper?

Old Man has finished his washing and retires to his cabin. Khloe goes visibly pale.

May: Whoa. He's going.

Khloe: I can't believe it...

May: I know, I thought the whole boat was abandoned.

Khloe: Yes...

May: Why does he never come out? And why does he never move on?

Khloe: ...

May: Surely he's got something better to do. *(May turns towards "Winehouse" to see if Max is there, he's not).*

Khloe: Perhaps.

May: Maybe he is a serial killer.

Khloe: *(Sharp)* No.

May: He could be? Are you going to speak to him then?

Khloe: No, I don't think so. I don't want to.

May: Are you okay?

Khloe: *(Forces a smile)* Yes of course, just, a bit surprised. I thought it was abandoned too!

Pause

May: Okay. That's all right then. You looked like you were on something for a second.

Long pause. There's nothing left to watch. May sighs.

May: I'm bored now I've got to go.

May returns to the cabin, picks up her sunglasses and steps onto the promenade. With Khloe rises still transfixed on Old Man's boat.

Khloe: Okay. Have fun. Be careful.

May: Do I look okay?

Khloe: *(Without looking)* Yes gorgeous.

May: Are you sure? It's important.

Khloe: You look great.

May: You're not even looking at me.

Khloe: *(Looks)* Yes good. Wha...You found your sunglasses?

May: Yeah they were on my dresser the whole time. Get over it.

Khloe is silent.

May: Okay bye, love you.

Khloe: *(Turns attention back onto Old Man's boat)* Bye hunny, love you too. Be careful please.

Khloe is transfixed on the boat, without taking her eyes off of it she reaches into her pocket and brings out another cigarette. And lights it.

Khloe: It can't be...

Max emerges from his cabin with a rolled up cigarette in his ear. He emerges freshly changed. He proceeds to lock his cabin and then checks the boat is held in place. He then notices Khloe.

Max: *Khloe* ...Are you okay?... *Khloe?*

Khloe: *(Under her breath. Transfixed on the boat)* I'm fine.

Max: *(With urgency)* Khloe?

Khloe: (Sharper this time) I'm fine!
 Max: ...Huh whoa, sorry.
 Khloe: *(Turns to him)* I'm sorry Max
 Max: It's fine, sorry for disturbing- *(Turns to leave)*
 Khloe: - are you off out as well?
 Max: *(Turns back)* Yeah I plan to er, I've got a date...er meeting, it's actually a meeting.
 Khloe: *(Smiles, though there is something pained about her now)* You picked a fine day for it.
 Max: I know right? Can't wait for summer when you think nineteen degrees is cold!
 Khloe: Have a lovely time.
 Max: Thank you. *(Goes to leave, and turns back to look at Khloe, he pauses, tries to mouth the words before they come out)* Are you sure you're okay?
 Khloe: *(She looks at him, lovingly)* I'm fine.
 Max: Okay. *(He turns to go, as he passes the Old Man's boat...)*
 Khloe: Max?
 Max: *(He abruptly turns)* Yes?

Khloe energetically beckons Max over with her finger, as if she has a big secret to tell.

Khloe: I need to ask you something.
 Max: Oh, Miss Reynolds...I...
 Khloe: Nothing like that Max, don't be stupid.
 Max: Oh good.
 Khloe: I need to know something.
 Max: *(Hot under the collar)* Umm...yes?
 Khloe: This is important and you can't tell May I asked you.
 Max: Oh god.
 Khloe: Do you know anything about the man? *(Points to the boat with her cigarette).*
 Max: What?
 Khloe: Have you seen him before?
 Max: W-Where?
 Khloe: In the boat, Max.
 Max: The one next to yours?
 Khloe: Yes.
 Max: No, I've never seen him. I mean, that boat's been here longer than I have.
 Khloe: Well, everyone has had their boat longer than you have.
 Max: I don't mean it like that. I used to share a room just up the road, and I'd walk to work past here, along the canals, past this spot. And as I walk I like to take in the surroundings, you know how it is, and I would always see that old rust bucket. I assumed she was just décor, didn't know a fella was living in it.
 Khloe: *(Acknowledging)* Okay, thank you.
 Max: Wait, have you? Is there someone actually in there?
 Khloe: Yes. May and I saw him for the first time just a few minutes ago. There's something about him.
 Max: He's really got you wrapped up, he must be a fine looking fella.
 Khloe: Don't.
 Max: I'm just saying if creepy and alone is/ your type
 Khloe: /Seriously. I know you're only joking, I know you're a kind soul, but please. Please don't.
 Max: I'm, I'm sorry. Look it's twenty past now I should get going.
 Khloe: Wait, please.
 Max: What is it?
 Khloe: I need to talk to someone.
 Max: Are you alright? Should I call May?
 Khloe: No you'll do Max.
 Max: Oh okay.

They sit down on Ash, hiding the Old Man's boat from view. Long pause. Khloe breathes heavily. Max looks at her, making sure she's okay. Her breath gets faster; she puts her hand on her chest.

Max: You're not having a panic attack are you?

Khloe: I'm. I'm not sure.

Max: Do you, know him Khloe?

Pause

Khloe: I think, I do.

Pause

I've been living on boats for almost nineteen years Max. Almost half my life. I got 'Ash' just before May was born; I believed it would be so therapeutic for me and for the baby. And it was. May was so beautiful when she was born; her smile took all the pain I felt away. She was born on Ash you know. I got the boat to get away from the awful energy in this city, she was an escape, and we travelled. We got to see England for what it really is, and it's beautiful. It's peaceful. It's so friendly. You would see beautiful view after beautiful view, like those old Constable landscapes. I've never been happier than when I've been with the 'Lady Ash'. She was my saviour. But she wasn't my first boat. I met a man named Sylvester right here, in Camden. I was a mid-20 something trying to encourage others to donate to keep this river clean. Real hippie stuff. And one grey, cold day I had no one to sign, no passers-by, no one would talk to me. It was freezing, and I was miserable. I almost went home and then I heard a voice, from one of the boats. Sylvester invited me in; he seemed kind, and gentle. He whipped me up some hot chocolate and we got talking. He was, very intriguing. Though at the time, all I could think about was getting him to donate. He was the perfect candidate after all; he obviously cared about the canal. Over time I got to know him a little better, I'd get the odd donation from him and speak with him on whenever I passed by. If it was cold and grey, a hot chocolate would be made before he even saw me. I even got a chance to steer the boat down the canal. She had no name, which I thought was unlucky. I got learn about his life, his way of thinking. He developed this mind-set from listening to 'Paul Robeson'...

Max: I have no clue.

Khloe: *(Smiles)* Neither did I. Sylvester compared himself to a character in one of his songs, he was a famous blues singer back in the 1930's. There was this song though from 1928. 'Ol' Man River'. I'll never forget. It was about-

Max: Oh I know that one, I've heard of it-

Khloe: -Yeah. It's a story about a man who travels alone on the wide Mississippi, with no care in the world. No one to take control, no one to tell him no. He observes everyone around him, toiling in the fields, sweating and straining. Whilst he coasts on by. It sounds so sweet, I can imagine it in that hot Southern sun.

Pause

That was his philosophy, Sylvester's, he wanted to be a free man and live without limits. It sounded so wonderful! He lived a life with no life at all. And I got to see into this man and see him for who he was, who he really was. After some time I understood why he preferred isolation, why he separated himself from others. He didn't choose to go, he was casted out. He was sick. And when a sick man without limits confronts you, what can you do to stop him? How can you make him realise, that there in that moment he is wrong. So fucking wrong... He had lived the life he wanted without a single fuck for anyone else. Not for me. Not even for her.

Max: *Khloe ...*

Khloe: The pregnancy I dealt with alone. But I couldn't do it in the city; I couldn't be here, not anymore, not knowing he was there. I raised her elsewhere, in Norfolk. I bought Ash with the little amount I had and lived free. It was bliss. We moved back to London 5 years ago; May needed the city, craved for it. Whilst I came here for a different reason. And nineteen years later, I think I've found it.

Max: Why are you telling me this?

Khloe: I know you're seeing May. And I'm not worried, I'm happy, I trust you, you're a good man. And you'll look after her.

Max: What, what are you saying?

Khloe grabs Max's cigarette from behind his ear, lights it for him, and places it in his mouth.

Khloe: Go on. She's waiting.

Max stares bewildered.

Max: Are you going in there? What if something goes wrong?

Khloe: That already happened long ago.

Max: Are you sure it's him?

Khloe: You should go.

Max rises sheepishly, and walks off into the same direction as May, and looks back at Khloe, who is preparing another cigarette. He rushes off.

Khloe slowly makes her way off Ash, smoking still, stands on the promenade for a moment, contemplating. She makes the decision and steps onto Old Man's boat. She slowly walks towards his cabin door. With precision and directness she crushes her cigarette onto the roof of the boat. And descends down the stairs.

- End -