
Six Degrees of Separation

John Guare

One Act. A smart New York apartment on Fifth Avenue.

Ouisa (short for Louisa) Kittredge (43) is 'very attractive'. She and her husband Flanders are successful art dealers. They have three children who are all students. She is an accomplished and witty hostess; the mistress of the one-line put-down. The calm of their affluent, sheltered lives is threatened when Paul, a young black man, arrives out of the blue on their doorstep. He is offered refuge in their home when it becomes apparent that he has been mugged in Central Park, is a university friend of their children and is also the son of the famous black actor Sidney Poitier. The truth however is that Paul is a conman and fantasist who has duped the Kittredges as he has previously deceived several other victims of his scam. Paul regales his hosts with tales of his famous 'father', which they eagerly lap up, and he even offers them parts in 'father's' latest production: the movie version of the hit musical Cats. In another subsequent con, Paul, pretending that his 'father' is now Flan, successfully dupes a young aspiring actor out of a thousand dollars. When the actor commits suicide the police eventually catch up with Paul and he is hauled off to jail. In this scene Ouisa and Flan are trying to come to terms with just how this all happened and what they really feel about Paul. Ouisa is forced to question the values of the gossipy, materialistic world she inhabits.

OUISA. He wanted to be us. Everything we are in the world, this paltry thing – our life – he wanted it. He stabbed himself to get in here. He envied us. We're not enough to be envied.

[FLAN. Like the papers said. We have hearts.]

Having a heart is not the point. We were hardly taken in. We believed him – for a few hours. He did more for us in a few hours than our children ever did. He wanted to be your

child. Don't let that go. He sat out in that park and said that man is my father. He's in trouble and we don't know how to help him.

[FLAN. Help him? He could've killed me. And you.]

You were attracted to him –

[FLAN. Cut me out of that pathology! You are on your own –]

Attracted by youth and his talent and the embarrassing prospect of being in the movie version of *Cats*. Did you put that in your *Times* piece? And we turn him into an anecdote to dine out on. Or dine in on. But it was an experience. I will not turn him into an anecdote. How do we fit what happened to us into life without turning it into an anecdote with no teeth and a punch line you'll mouth over and over for years to come. 'Tell the story about the imposter who came into our lives – 'That reminds me of the time this boy – .' And we become these human juke boxes spilling out these anecdotes. But it was an experience. How do we *keep* the experience?

COMMENTARY: Ouisa has clearly had an 'experience'. But she only goes far enough to say that and no further towards understanding what it all means. She searches for significance in the event. She's also trying to locate her identity through the event. Ouisa is a seeker after change. She's looking for someone – anyone – who will come into her comfortable, upper-middle-class existence and rearrange all the pieces. Paul the conman does just that. But rather than feel anger and resentment, Ouisa feels only acceptance and even thanks. Her life, after all, is a kind of fraud as well. She's an impostor herself. And maybe that is why she identifies with Paul so fully.