WHALE WOMEN

A drama by Margaret O’Donnell

Margaret O'Donnell
4975 14th Avenue South
Seattle, WA
margaretplaywright@outlook.com
© 2023, 2026
53 pages/ 90 minutes run time

Slug Line

Over 60, broke, evicted, laid off, and depressed, Alison's been talking to someone on the beach who claims she's an orca passing as a human. Orca Woman wants Alison to dive deep. Is this an invitation to death? Or life?

Synopsis

Sixty-one year old passionate whale photographer Alison works as caretaker of an old beach resort on a Pacific Northwest island. When the resort's owner sells the land to a luxury housing developer, Alison loses her job and her house. She's tired and broke, has no skills she feels are marketable, can't find anyone interested in her art anymore, and is ashamed to ask her friends for help. She's been seeing visions on the beach of a woman who claims she's a whale, encouraging Alison to reclaim her power by diving deep. What power? Diving deep is frightening…

Cast Breakdown

ALISON

Heavy-bodied, stocky, tall. Worried. Early 60s. Limps and uses a pole to walk. Full-time housekeeper/cook/general labor at the beach resort. She lives in one of the small cottages.

TAMI

Alison's friend, thin, wiry, chatty, recovering alcoholic, part-time maid at the resort, and part-time grocery stocker. Smoker. Late 40s. Lives in a cottage at the resort.

ANNIE/SEA SPIRIT

An orca. On land, she takes human form: mid-70s, scrawny, wise ass, irreverent, with long white hair.

JOE/SHERIFF'S DEPUTY

Mid-70s, part-time maintenance at the resort, a friend of Alison and Tami; calm, gentle.

GLORIA

Early 60s, resort owner, nervous, rattled, jumpy. Also a sea creature.

Time and Place

Act I: October. Present time. An old 'rustic' and now shabby Cottages on the Beach resort on the west side of San Juan Island, Washington State. It's a ferry ride away from the Olympic Peninsula in Washington state, and from Vancouver Island, in British Columbia.

Act II: December. Present time. A strip of land and a sidewalk on a street near the beach in Port Townsend, Washington, across the Strait of Juan de Fuca from San Juan Island.

Note on Set Design

In Act I, Alison's cottage, open on two sides, is stage left rear. It's a 1930s WPA-like log construction, with a 1950s modernized kitchen. There's a roughly-made wooden table and three chairs, and a single bed, and some kitchen cabinets. A mini refrigerator. There's a front door and an inner door that leads to an unseen darkroom. There's a couple of high windows. Stage front is the beach, and audience watches the play from the sea. Light and sound reveal everything else. The cabin is lit with a few lamps. The beach is lit by sunlight or moonlight and is strewn with rocks, seaweed, and shells. When Ali jumps into the sea, she jumps into the space in which the audience sits. In Act II, the beach becomes a sidewalk in Port Townsend, a town on the northern edge of the Olympic Peninsula. The cottage is replaced by a dirty and ragged tent on a strip of land bordering the sidewalk. The audience watches the play from the street itself.

There is a translucent screen at stage rear through which actors or shadow puppets mime the folk tale.

Scene I

It's getting on for dusk, a mid-October day. Alison, Joe, and Tami are stacking cut driftwood against the side of Alison's cabin. They sit on Alison's cabin steps to rest. Tami smokes, Alison pours coffee into mugs for all.

JOE

Ahhh. My favorite part of the day. Just kickin' back with my best buddies.

ALISON

Me too. Watching the sun set behind the mountains…

TAMI

Me three. If only it could last forever.

JOE

Forever! (*laughs*) What lasts forever? I figure I got five more years of work in me, God willin'. But I'll hobble over from the old folks' home every day to sit here and admire the view with you two.

TAMI

We may have to hobble over to the old folks' home to visit you, Joe. I think Gloria's planning to sell this place.

ALI

What? She hasn't said anything to me.

TAMI

Not to me neither. But you know she's always grousin' about how much money this place takes to run. How the bookings are way down. But she's been hintin' around a lot more about how she's not gonna pay for this or that. Like paint for the cabin four bathroom, for God's sake. I told her she can't rent cabin four to anybody in the state it's in.

ALISON

She won't sell. She'd be breaking her promise to Betty. Betty made her swear she'd never sell. She can only donate it to a nonprofit.

JOE

It's not in Betty's will or anything. That part about only selling to a nonprofit.

ALISON

How do you know that?

JOE

Gloria told me. I said somethin' about when she'll be ready to quit bein' the island's premier inn-keeper. She's no spring chicken, anymore/

ALISON

(*snorts*) Premier! It wasn't even that back in the fifties when Betty bought it/

JOE

Anyway, she said that part about the nonprofit wasn't in Betty's will.

TAMI

Damn! Really? She's gonna sell. I just know it. We'll all be out of a job. And Ali and me will be out of a house. Crap. This is the best place I ever had.

ALISON

Wait a minute! Why go all gloomy? She didn't say she was going to do it, right Joe?

JOE

Naw. She didn't actually say it.

ALISON

Even if she sells, we might stay on as staff. Nobody knows this place like we do. Maybe they'll use the cabins for classes. Best place to watch whales from land in the whole San Juans. And to see how few there are left now.

TAMI

It's all the ships and the whale-watching boats, isn't it? Scaring them off from their feeding grounds. Makin' so much noise the whales can't communicate with each other. Or find fish. But people say whole island economy would crash without the tourists for the whale watching.

ALISON

Not true! This island has plenty of great spots for whale watching from land. It's the boats that interfere with feeding, and taking care of calves, and communicating. We have *double* the shipping traffic, right here (*points to the beach)* than we did only fifteen years ago.

(All are silent.)

ALISON

When I see the whales, I feel like it's me out there in the strait, trying to survive.

JOE

You know, my grandmother loved this island, and this sea, just like you do, Ali. And she drew, like you take pictures. All us grandkids have some of her artwork. She would have been shocked to see how few whales are coming back every year.

ALISON

It's better she didn't live to see it. (*beat*) I get a little sad when I hear people tell about their grandmothers. And mothers. Always have.

JOE

Oh, Ali. I'm sorry. I forgot.

ALISON

No, no, don't be sorry. It's just…I missed hearing family stories. I only knew what the social worker told me. My mother was very young when she gave me up. That's it. *(beat)* I used to have Steve. Even after the divorce, we were still friends. Then Betty died, and then Steve. God, I felt so alone.

TAMI

Those so-called foster parents of yours didn't deserve you, Ali. They should have been reported. Damn! I hope the state's cleaned up its act since then.

ALISON

(*beat*) Well, at least they kept me alive. And I learned to depend on myself. I've never been helpless like that again. Remember the Billie Holiday song? (*she sings*) Mama may have, Papa may have, but God bless the child that's got his own, that's got his own.'

JOE

That's you all over, Ali. Miz Self-Sufficient.

ALISON

Only way to be for a singleton like me, right?

TAMI

(laughs) Not for me! (*sings the Beatles tune*) I get by with a little help from my friends.

All laugh. Daylight begins to fade. Alison enters her cabin to prepare dinner, and Tami and Joe exit. Unseen, the sheriff's deputy enters and tacks an eviction notice on the cabin door. The night passes with the sound of waves rolling on the shore. [music]

It's morning. Alison goes down to the beach with a wheelbarrow to haul cut driftwood. She sees the eviction notice and stares at it for a long time.

Tami enters, out of breath. She sees the notice on the door.

TAMI

Damn it! You got one too. Crap, crap, crap! She did it! The greedy miser. And she never once told us anything! Now we've got fifteen days to vacate? I'm suing her! Damn it! There's gotta be laws she's breaking.

Alison rips the notice off the door, and crumples it up. She stuffs it in her pants pocket.

TAMI

What are you doing? (*she waves an envelope she takes out of her pocket)* This was in my mailbox this morning. We're fired. We get two weeks' severance, but the job's over, as of now. She sold the place, Ali! Look! *(she opens Ali's mailbox on the front porch, and pulls out an envelope)* She fired you too, just like me. Ali!

ALISON

I'm not leaving.

Alison continues to the beach.

TAMI

(shouting to Alison's back) You got a plan? 'Cuz I sure don't. Oh, what the hell…

Tami joins Alison on the beach. They pile the cut wood into the wheelbarrow. They are silent as they listen to the sound of the tide, and the seagulls' cries.

TAMI

This won't dry out anytime soon.

ALISON

Ready for next year.

TAMI

What next year? We'll be out of here in two weeks.

ALISON

Everybody needs firewood.

TAMI

Real estate developers don't. They live on the warmth of their money. And gas fireplaces.

ALISON

Something will come up.

TAMI

Yeah? Like what? Our fairy godmother?

Day fades to night, then brightens to day. It's two weeks later, early morning, in Alison's cabin. Alison fills a coffeepot, plugs it in, then remembers there's no electricity. She cuts some bread, and sits staring out the window towards the beach. Tami knocks. She's got a bag and a cardboard tray with two coffee to-go cups.)

TAMI

Ali?

ALISON

Hi Tam. Come on in.

TAMI

Mornin!

ALISON

Morning. I'd offer you a cup, but/

TAMI

The cup comes to you, Madame. (*she sits at the table shares out the coffee and pastries*)

ALISON

Ahh. How'd you get the money for this? Must be twenty bucks' worth of fancy stuff.

TAMI

Gift card. Found it on the ground.

(They drink and eat.)

TAMI

How'd you sleep?

ALISON

Kinda restless. You?

TAMI

Same. (*beat*) I checked with the shelter in Port Townsend yesterday. There's room for the two of us. *(beat*) Ali?

ALISON

Yeah. I heard you. I'm not going there.

TAMI

Huh. (*beat*) She'll do it. You know she will. You'll be out there on the road with your stuff in a pile at three o'clock tomorrow. In the rain. She won't even let you have a tarp, betcha. (*beat*) She won't even own the place after today. The developer/

ALISON

Yeah. I know.

They sit in silence.

TAMI

Well, I better get my butt over to the store. 'Specially since I'm taking off early for the move tomorrow. I can make as many trips as we need, Ali.

ALISON

Thanks, Tam.

TAMI

You been thinking about what we've talked about? (*beat*) Ali? I can get you an interview at the store. They're looking for stockers.

ALISON

I can't see myself workin' inside, Tam.

TAMI

So. What are you gonna do after we're evicted? (*beat*) The shelter's a decent place. And they got storge lockers. You can get all your equipment and boxes in one of those. They're big.

ALISON

Yeah.

TAMI

(*big sigh*) I'm gonna pack my stuff up tonight and take it over to the shelter after work tomorrow. I can be back here for you and your stuff then. You got a lot of stuff, girl. All those years of, what do you call them, negatives? That darkroom equipment. All those prints. You don't want that stuff trashed.

ALISON

Thanks, Tam. We'll see.

TAMI

Oh for God's sake, Ali! You got all kinds of options! The shelter is just temporary! You got social security comin' in what? Six months? And you can get on the apartment list with the county now. I did. (*beat*) Did you call that woman at the museum back about your photos?

ALISON

No.

TAMI

Ali! That could be your big break! You get a display at the island museum and you're launched. You could get a book deal. People will be lining up to buy your prints.

ALISON

(*beat*) I've had gallery shows before. Back in the nineties. Lot of work. Distraction from actually bein' able to get out and shoot.

TAMI

(*beat*) Okay, okay. Did you apply for unemployment?

ALISON

No.

TAMI

You want me to drive you to the office?

ALISON

No. Thanks Tam.

TAMI

Ali. It's done. Island Conserve lost. There's no hope. Gloria's going through with the sale. The judge said they didn't prove irreparable harm to the environment. Remember? The developer promised to be careful about not polluting and the judge said that was good enough for him. So it's over. You can't stay here.

ALISON

I know what the judge said.

TAMI

We haven't got water or heat, Ali! No electricity! She said she'd turn it off, and she sure did.

ALISON

I've got blankets.

TAMI

Don't give me that Miz Self-Sufficiency crap! I know about you. You won't take help from anybody 'cause you think you're better than everybody/

ALISON

That's not it! It was never it! It's the opposite, okay? I hate it when people try to so-called 'help me'.

TAMI

Okay, okay, okay. Forgettin' my AA training. You gotta do your own life. And I'll do mine.

Tami exits. Alison sits at the table alone for a while, not moving. She gets up, takes a bag out of a drawer, and lines up a row of prescription bottles on a whisky bottle on the table. She downs a big glass of whisky, choking on the burn. She contemplates the pill bottles, picking them up, putting them down. She's indecisive. She startled by a loud banging on the cabin door, and high-pitched cries that sound like a woman's. She goes to the door.)

ALISON

Tam? Is that you?

The cries and banging continue. Alison opens the door and Annie comes stumbling in.

ANNIE

Whew! I thought you'd never open the door! Whaddya doin' with a locked door anyway? People don't lock their doors around here. I wasn't counting on havin' to yell the place down.

ALISON

Who are you? What do you want?

ANNIE

(*looking around)* Got any food? I'm starving. I mean, really starving. Pickin's been terrible all winter.

Annie starts opening doors and drawers, looking. She begins to open the darkroom door.

ALISON

No! Not there! That's my darkroom. You'll ruin the prints!

ANNIE

What does it matter? Aren't you done with all this? Looks like you're about to call it quits. (*she indicates the pill bottles and whisky.*) But okay. (*she closes the door)* Hey, can I have your clothes? And the blanket? But first, food. You gotta have somethin'.

ALISON

If I give you food, will you leave?

ANNIE

Maybe. Maybe not. Let's see the food.

Alison brings out a loaf of bread and some cheese. While she's occupied, Annie stuffs all the bottles in a pocket.

ALISON

Here.

ANNIE

(*begins to stuff her mouth and talks with her mouth full after the first wolfing*) God, this is so damn stale! How can you stand it? Good thing I'm not picky. What else you got?

ALISON

I haven't been buying groceries for a while/

ANNIE

(*eating*) Pickles? Ketchup? Jar of mayo? Humans usually have that kind of stuff.

ALISON

(*piling some bottles from the refrigerator on the table)* Have at it.

ANNIE

Crackers? Cans of something? Anything.

Alison pulls more stuff from the cabinets and piles it on the table.

ANNIE

Can opener? Plate? Knife?

Alison gets them.

ANNIE

All right! Better than what I've been getting lately. I take it this whisky's up for grabs? If you're still planning to off yourself, I'll leave you enough.

Alison brings another glass.

ALISON

Help yourself. (*she watches Annie eat and belch*.) How'd you know about me? Where are…? Did you take the bottles?

ANNIE

I saw you through the window. Figured I'd be better off with you alive.

ALISON

Why? Why do you care? (*she looks at the cabin's high windows*.) Nobody can see in those windows.

ANNIE

Oh, maybe I looked down the chimney. I don't remember.

Alison makes a 'what the hell' gesture. There is no chimney.

ANNIE

Let's get to the important stuff. What's your name, anyway?

ALISON

Alison.

Annie fills two glasses and pushes one over to Alison. Annie drinks.

ANNIE

(*choking*) Pee-yew! Now that is God-awful. What are you doing to yourself with this crappy stuff? No wonder you're ready to take off. Don't know how to treat yourself right.

ALISON

So don't drink it then.

ANNIE

Oh no. Are you kidding? Any port in a storm.

ALISON

Why'd you say humans?

ANNIE

When?

ALISON

A little bit ago. You said humans usually have that kind of stuff.

ANNIE

'Cause they do. Not down in Mexico. But once you hit the California coast, the white humans like you do.

ALISON

You don't have ketchup? Mayo?

ANNIE

I ain't white. I don't live on land. I don't have a refrigerator. And I ain't human.

ALISON

You look human.

ANNIE

Good! That's what I'm going for. The human look. See, that's why I'm here. That and the food. Crappy as it is.

ALISON

What are you then?

ANNIE

An orca.

ALISON

Please.

ANNIE

I'd show you, but then I might get stranded in here.

ALISON

Orcas don't talk!

Annie opens her mouth and the cabin fills with orca sounds, the sound of waves and an orca spy-hopping. Alison covers her ears. The sounds stop.

ANNIE

We talk. But let's get down to business. I've been seeing you take pictures of me for a long time.

ALISON

Yeah. You want me to ask permission?

ANNIE

(*laughs*) Naw. But it's only fair we should benefit, somehow. (*beat*) I mean, we're desperate out there. You gotta know what's happening to us.

Annie sweeps her arm towards the view through the cabin window. She looks through and picks up some of the framed prints stacked against the wall, until she finds one she holds up.

ANNIE

Here's a good one of me! (*she shows it to Alison*)

ALISON

(*beat*) How do you propose to benefit?

ANNIE

Now that's exactly where I need your help! You gotta get these pictures out there. Get support, you know, like when people see how pretty we are, they'll stop all the crap they're doing to us. It's like they don't know we're there.

ALISON

It's not that easy!

ANNIE

Look. These are desperate times. I'm the last one of all my pod. It's so lonely out there. Everyone else starved or got hit by a ship or got lost somewhere along the journey. We got a two thousand mile migration every year! We couldn't hear each other because of the ship noise. The water's filled with crappy chemicals that got into our breast milk and lungs. And it's too warm for us. Plus, nothing to eat anymore.

ALISON

I know all this.

ANNIE

Yeah? And what are you doing about it?

ALISON

I've tried to sell my photos! I don't even make enough to pay for the supplies.

ANNIE

Look, Ali. Okay if I call you Ali? I feel like I'm getting to know you. You've gotta try it. We'll all die out there. You got a room. You got food. Warmth. Clean air. And nobody's hittin' you with a ship. You got everything you need. Can you spare a little attention to the rest of creation?

ALISON

Nobody listens to people like me.

ANNIE

(*snorts*) Ship sludge! Who else? All this endangered species protection stuff's gotta work out. It's just gotta.

ALISON

We've got more ships than ever in these waters. And the dams aren't coming down on the Snake anytime soon. Goodbye salmon. And that's practically the only food you orcas eat.

ANNIE

(huffily) No need to rub it in.

ALISON

I'm just a photographer! Nobody looks at my pictures anymore anyway. I can't even find a coffeeshop that wants to give me a show. And anyway, this whole place, all the cottages, the lodge, everything, is going to be ripped out of the ground and trashed. This week.

ANNIE

You mean that deal with the developer? I heard about that.

ALISON

How? I thought you lived in the water.

ANNIE

I have my ways.

ALISON

The contract's signed. Closing's today.

ANNIE

So? It's not the end of the world. You got the whole rest of the coastline to see to. You got your pictures to show, about us. And now you can tell the story of bein' visited by an orca. That's pretty good, isn't it?

ALISON

This? This is a dream.

ANNIE

Dreams. Everything starts as a dream.

ALISON

I'm out of a job. Out of a house. I've got no space to store all my equipment. No studio. I've got no pension. Not eligible yet for Social Security. Two hundred a week unemployment, which won't even get me a room with a shared bath and kitchen in somebody's basement. A broken-down body. I'm sixty-one years old. I'm done dreaming! I'm just done.

ANNIE

Well, if you're sure. I'll leave you to it. (*beat*) Don't trash the pictures, okay? Maybe I can find somebody else to help/

ALISON

You're welcome to all of it. (*beat*) Are you going to give me back my pills?

ANNIE

What pills? (*beat*) Hey, nice to meet you before you took off. This is the best picture of me I've seen in a long time. And thanks for the food.

Annie exits to the beach, and then to the sea. Alison leaves the cabin and walks to the beach. She searches for a big-enough rock to weigh her down, then walks into the sea. She flinches at the cold and the salt waves, and is thrown off balance until she rights herself and sinks down, down, down into the bottom of the sea, holding the rock to her belly. She sits on the bottom, still clutching the rock and looking around.

Deep underwater music. Sea Spirit enters and sits faces Alison. She's solemn, stern, majestic, dressed in black and white robes. They observe one another.)

SEA SPIRIT

Seeker. (*beat*) What are you seeking?

ALISON

Am I dead? It doesn't feel like it.

SEA SPIRIT

You're not dead. You are a seeker.

ALISON

I'm not. I just want oblivion.

ANNIE

That's not something I can give you. (*beat*) You are here on a quest. What is it?

ALISON

I'm not on a quest. I don't have any hopes.

ANNIE

Ah. That is what you are seeking. Hope. You will find what you are seeking here. If you look.

Color and light and sound swirl throughout the sea. Annie closes her eyes. After a few beats with her head bowed, Alison rises, puts down the big rock, and moves as a dancer throughout the sea, seeking. She not lame in the sea. Three sea creatures help her look, accompanying her. She finds a fist-sized rock that draws her magnetically; she picks it up and holds it. She sits before Sea Spirit and puts the stone in front of her.)

ALISON

I found this.

SEA SPIRIT

Ah. A powerful spirit has chosen you. Now you must consent.

ALISON

What kind of powerful spirit? Don't I have to know, first?

SEA SPIRIT

That can only be revealed as you live with the spirit.

ALISON

At least you can tell me if it's a good spirit or an evil spirit.

SEA SPIRIT

Only you will decide that.

ALISON

What if I don't want the spirit?

SEAT SPIRIT

You will die here at the bottom of the sea.

ALISON

That's why I came here.

SEA SPIRIT

Is it?

ALISON

Everything is so strange. Maybe I don't anymore. I don't know. What if I want the spirit?

SEA SPIRIT

You will take yourself and your spirit with you, back to the land.

ALISON

And then? Will things be different?

SEA SPIRIT

Only you will decide that.

ALISON

Then what good is it! I have nothing. What can a powerful spirit do for somebody who has nothing?