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Please, No Flowers

First place, Arts Council of Philadelphia National One-Act Playwriting Contest
First place, Norman Corwin National Playwriting Contest

DRAMEDY. In this poignant, bittersweet play, two female ghosts, their bodies laid out in coffins at a funeral home, reflect on their lives and life choices as they watch as mourners pay their respects. Esther, a young woman who is delighted that she ended her life by jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge, is at first relieved that there are no flowers or mourners to cry for her. But when a young man brings her flowers, Esther questions her decision. Lena, an elderly woman who had run a delicatessen with her late husband, finds her death a respite from a crazy world, "So long, life, I've had enough of you!" But when Lena's niece arrives, Lena starts to think that her lonely life as a workaholic with only her pet birds and dog for company wasn't all for nothing. Soon, the mourners disappear and Lena and Esther return to their coffins. As the caretaker locks the door of the funeral parlor and closes the lids on the coffins, the room is filled with laughter, leaving the two ghosts to wonder if this is all some kind of joke.

Performance Time: Approximately 30-45 minutes.

Characters

(2 M, 6 F, 1 flexible)

CARETAKER: Elderly funeral caretaker; wears a vest with a pocket watch; flexible.

LENA GROSSMAN: 60s, dead; ran a delicatessen with her late husband and loved her pet birds and dog; has gray hair; female.

ESTHER RUBEL: 35, dead; committed suicide by jumping off the Gold Gate Bridge; plain-looking and wears a plain dress; female.

MR. MAX HIRSHMAN: Esther's frugal employer; older, extremely well-dressed; male.

MRS. HIRSHMAN: Mr. Hirshman's wife; stout, extremely well-dressed; female.

MRS. BLEEKER: Early 60s, nicely groomed; female.

MRS. LEHR: Early 60s, nicely groomed; female.

YOUNG MAN: Intended to propose to Esther; wears a shapeless tweed suit; male.

SANDY: Lena's niece; female.

Setting

A funeral parlor, San Francisco.

Set

The setting may be realistic or impressionistic. For example, biers may be used for the caskets. Whatever style of design is used, the feeling should be ethereal.

Funeral parlor. The ornate room seems to date back to the 1920s. There are faded red velvet drapes fringed with gold tassels, Spanish-style paneling and arched entrances, a wrought-iron standing candelabra, four gilded folding chairs and, most conspicuously, two caskets. One casket is somewhat more elaborate than the other. Adjacent to the main entrance to the room, there is a baroque table that holds a large visitors' register.

Props

Glowing candles
Handkerchief, for Caretaker
Pocket watch, for Caretaker
Eyeglasses, for Mrs. Hirshman
Bouquet of assorted flowers with some yellow roses
Handkerchief, for Young Man
Wristwatch, for Mrs. Hirshman

Sound Effects

Tapping sound
Sound of laughter (sounds like the laughter from a Fun House
mechanical woman)

“Some joke, eh?”

—Esther

Please, No Flowers

(AT RISE: A funeral parlor, San Francisco. An elderly Caretaker enters, silently "lights" the candles, then slowly crosses around one of two caskets, and with his sleeve, polishes its brass handle. He starts toward the door, stops, removes a handkerchief from his pocket, and diligently dusts a bronze statue of a cherub and a faun. As he does so, he shakes his head and sighs as if to say, "The help these days!" He exits. Pause. Silence. A tapping sound is heard from within one of the caskets.)

LENA: *(In a low-pitched voice.)* Yoo-hoo! Anybody there?
Hello...

ESTHER: *(From the other casket, hesitantly.)* Wait. Yes, yes, I'm here. Hello, it's me! I can hear you.

LENA: Your voice sounds familiar. What's your name?

ESTHER: Esther. Esther Rubel.

LENA: That sounds familiar, too. Mine's Lena Grossman.
Tell me, did you belong to the B'nai B'rith?

ESTHER: No, I never belonged to any organizations...wasn't a joiner.

(The door slowly opens and the Caretaker enters.)

LENA: Shhhh! Someone's coming.

(Silence. The Caretaker lifts the lids of each casket, revealing Esther Rubel in one and Lena Grossman in the other. Long pause. Silence. To test the Caretaker's reaction, Esther suddenly bursts into song.)

ESTHER: *(Sings.)* "Somewhere over the rainbow..." *(Silence. The Caretaker does not react. Esther kicks her legs up in the air. No response from the Caretaker. To Lena, shrugs.)* Well, I guess we're ghosts.

(The Caretaker slowly crosses to a baroque table, opens the visitors' register, checks the inkstand, looks at his vest pocket watch, and exits.)

LENA: What a relief! Phew, it's so restful... *(Sits up in the casket and makes herself comfortable. Glances at Esther, surprised.)* My goodness, you're a young woman! So, tell me, what happened? Childbirth maybe?

ESTHER: *(Leaning over the edge of the casket.)* Suicide. I was number [1,678] off the Golden Gate Bridge. *[Or insert the current number.]*

LENA: Listen, life like it was...who can blame you? You know, you look familiar. Maybe you were a customer of mine? For 20 years, after my husband died, I ran a delicatessen—

(Esther is now sitting on the edge of her casket with her legs dangling over the edge.)

ESTHER: I didn't indulge very much in delicatessen, only the packaged meats. But, sometimes, I would splurge, like on my birthday. I'd buy onion rolls and a prune Danish at the Ukrainian bakery. You see, I was too busy trying to keep up with Pacific Gas and Electric and the landlord and—

LENA: Me, I just let go. I could hear them talking...my niece, the doctors and nurses. *(Melodramatically.)* "If she's got the will, she'll make it, just a little of the old fight." Just like on a TV soap opera. Fight? I was tired of fighting. A whole lifetime of fighting...

ESTHER: You are so right.

LENA: So I let go of my niece's hand. I let go, and I let my hands fall limply. I remember thinking...*fight?* Why? What for? Maybe three years, ten years...it wasn't worth it. I was tired of, "Who's going to run for president?" and "What's happened to this generation?" and—

ESTHER: Yes, how true.

LENA: So, just like Marilyn Monroe said, "So long, fame, I've had you." Me, I said, "So long, life, I've had enough of you!" Yes, believe me, I felt you, life—tightly with love, frightened, in passion. And, besides, my niece Sandy...she's young. Let her enjoy my money. Let her use it. And, believe me, it was such a relief when I took that last breath...

ESTHER: (*Leaping out of her casket.*) Look! No flowers, no mourners! I'm glad there's no one to cry for me because I'm...I'm so happy! It's wonderful being free! Free of loneliness and worries...no more fears of what was going to be. It's here, the "to-be," and it's all over. You know, when I jumped from the bridge, I turned and yelled through the fog, "Goodbye PG&E, you jerks, you—!"

LENA: Yes, yes, goodbye, PG&E, and also all those hungry doctors with their big bills. Come. Come and look at the label in my coffin. It says the "Hollywood Model," and feel... (*Feeling the coffin lining.*) ...just feel the silk and soft foam. All my life, I've slept in a Murphy bed between sheets bought at white sales at [Penney's']. Now, it's silk for all eternity! [*Or insert another store.*]

ESTHER: Yes, it's wonderful! Oh, so wonderful! But it's such a funny feeling. It's like...an epilogue. This being nowhere...just in between, like I finished a book and I'm going to start a new one. And, now, this is like an epilogue...

LENA: I'm not so sure I like that thing...an epilogue. I always like to know what's coming next.

ESTHER: (*Leaning against Lena's casket.*) I wonder what the next book will be like: a tropical paradise, a burning furnace, or maybe, just nothing...years and years of nothing...just lying there like lying in bed on Sunday not moving or anything, just so glad to be there. But at least seven o'clock Monday morning will never come again! Yes, I'm glad I did it...so glad. I'm sure it would have gotten worse as I got older.

LENA: I just hope someone takes care of my birds and my dog, that's all. You know animals, they're so much nicer than people. They never hate.

ESTHER: Yes, animals are great, really great. *(Slight pause.)* But I wonder what people are saying? Not that I care! *(Reflectively.)* The people at the office, the girls I would sit next to at the Ali Baba ballroom on Saturday nights, that little old bachelor who'd always ask me to dance. Imagine, ten years of going regularly to the Ali Baba! *(Slight pause.)* And Mr. Hirshman...his payroll won't get out on time and the union representative will chew him out but good! *(Slight pause. Change of tone.)* But, just think, they're all reading about me. Yes, Esther Rubel—who received little attention before—now in the newspapers! I can just hear them saying proudly, “Why, I knew that girl! Look, look, I used to—” *(Turns to Lena.)* Do you think I made the headlines, Mrs. Grossman?

LENA: Sure, you made the headlines. You being number [1,678]. You set a record. *[Or insert most recent number.]*

ESTHER: But who's to miss me, really miss me? No, no one will ever say, “What happened to Baby Esther?” *(Sadly sings to the tune of “I Wonder What's Become of Sally.”)* “I wonder what's become of Esther...”

LENA: Me, I'd like to see my relatives' faces when they hear I left everything to my niece. I remember after my mother's funeral the arguing. “You take the silver, I'll take the linen and china.” Me, they left me a [TV and a few cracked CDs]. *[Or insert something else.]*

ESTHER: *(Impulsively.)* You know, Mrs. Grossman, I feel like a new person! Just suppose those people were right about reincarnation...I might go back a raving beauty!

LENA: Or a mouse. Who knows? Maybe worse yet, an ant.

ESTHER: Even that might be better! Ants stick together. They share. Anything's better than being alone, not sharing. I had a studio apartment furnished in the brightest colors, but to me, it was dark and empty because there was no one

there to share it, to love. I mean, that's really important...having someone to love. A woman like me needed love—at least a mother, a father, even a cousin who would send a card once a year. But there was no one. A person needs roots...the warmth of someone close. I had nothing but headaches. It was one thing after another, and every day seemed to become colder, darker. If it had been just a little balanced...you know, a little love, then a little trouble.

LENA: So, where did you get the nerve? Imagine! Such a big bridge! I would look down and get dizzy.

ESTHER: After a whole weekend of sitting around depressed and lonely—and as age creeps up on you, the depression and loneliness become more frightening—I took inventory of my, let's say, stock. The warehouse was empty. On top of that, I had a fierce sinus headache, a plugged-up toilet, a pile of bills and, well, I just pretended I was diving into the pool at the Jewish Community Center.

LENA: Imagine, such chutzpa.

ESTHER: At least you had a husband...some loving someone needing you. I can see you must have been a beautiful woman.

LENA: Who? Me? Never. Still, I was lucky for a while. *(Reflectively.)* Yes, he was a fine husband. Then one night he got up to go to the bathroom. I heard him, then went back to sleep. Suddenly, I didn't feel him. I would always snuggle up close, such a warm person. "Irving, Irving," I called. I got up and there he was on the bathroom floor. A heart attack. I was never the same after that. Maybe we were too close. After they— *(Indicates the lid of the casket.)* Do you think I might see my Irving?

ESTHER: I don't know. But, then, who am I to say? I always thought we just came to an abrupt end. We died, and that was all. But, look, here we are, and it hasn't ended.

LENA: *(In a small voice, calls.)* Irving...

ESTHER: Sure, sure, Lena, you'll see your Irving. Why not?
After this, anything is possible.

LENA: I-I think I'll get up for a while...walk around a bit, you
know, for old times' sake.

ESTHER: Here, let me help you.

(Esther assists Lena as she climbs out of her casket.)

LENA: Just for a little while.

ESTHER: It might be a heck of a long time before we can do
this again.

LENA: Tell me, you said you never had love...a nice young
woman like you?

ESTHER: Nice? Me? With this absurd face and figure?
(Pause.) Maybe if I'd had money. *(Pause.)* Yes, I loved a
young man, not the best-looking or the smartest...very poor
taste, always dandruff on his shoulders, but, still, I loved
him. Yet, I never really knew if— *(A sad little laugh.)* There I
am...still wondering, hoping! I thought all that would end
when I left my camera and purse on the bridge.

LENA: A camera? You were going to take pictures?

ESTHER: No, but the guards don't pay any special attention
to you that way. You look like just another tourist. *(Pause.)*
Oh, we had a few dates, but I'm sure he didn't love me, or
he would have said so.

LENA: Esther, did you say so?

*(Muffled voices are heard from the foyer. Pause. Mr. Hirshman
enters, followed by Mrs. Hirshman. They quietly go to the table and
sign the register. The only sound in the room is the loud scratching
of the worn pen point. Esther sees the Hirshmans.)*

ESTHER: *(Startled.)* Lena! It's my boss, Mr. Hirshman, and
his wife!

(Mr. and Mrs. Hirshman solemnly cross and stand before Esther's casket. Mrs. Hirshman puts on her glasses.)

MRS. HIRSHMAN: *(To Mr. Hirshman, staring intently into the casket.)* They did a good job, but, still, she has that crazy look on her face...like the characters you see in Haight-Ashbury. Those hippies—

MR. HIRSHMAN: Funny how you work with a person so many years and you really don't know them. I mean, jumping off a bridge! *(Sighs.)* But, then, somehow she always did seem a little odd—a bit meshuga—living alone, always complaining.

(Esther stands beside the Hirshmans.)

ESTHER: *(Turning to Lena, complaining.)* Who wouldn't complain?! He paid me practically nothing! Such a little man! Such a little person! Can you believe it?! He even kept track of how long a toner cartridge lasted! Can you imagine, Lena? To him, I was nothing!

LENA: That's why I had my own business. I did as I pleased.

ESTHER: Every time I'd say, "Mr. Hirshman, may I speak to you?" he'd yell, "If it's about a raise, forget it. Look, I can get another girl. It's an easy job. Besides, business is bad, and what with taxes like they are—" Oh, the lousy capitalist! A few dollars, just a few dollars more!

MR. HIRSHMAN: *(To Mrs. Hirshman.)* But her work was good. Yes, it wasn't bad, and always on time. *(Sighs.)* I don't think I'll ever be able to find another girl to replace her. As a matter of fact, I was just thinking about giving her a promotion and a little raise.

ESTHER: *(Angrily, clenching her fist.)* Hypocrite! Lousy hypocrite!

(Mrs. Hirshman looks at her watch.)

MRS. HIRSHMAN: (*Impatient.*) Please, Max, let's go. The dinner starts at seven, and I don't want to miss the fruit cup.

[END OF FREEVIEW.]