

THE RABBI
&
THE GRAVEDIGGER

by Art Shulman

SETTING

The play takes place at a cemetery. The time is the present. The time of day for all scenes is afternoon. The headstones are marble plaques lying flat.

At the beginning of the play, a grave covered with fresh dirt, with no headstone, is in the foreground. To the side or rear is an open grave with a pile of dirt nearby.

ACT 1
SCENE 1

AT RISE: RABBI takes a gun from a pocket, examines it, puts it back. HE takes out a cigar and sniffs it, as if it's his last pleasure on Earth. As GRAVEDIGGER enters RABBI puts away the cigar.

GRAVEDIGGER

That was a wonderful eulogy, Rabbi. I didn't know the woman you were honoring, but my eyes were moist.

RABBI

I meant each word. (Beat) Who are you?

GRAVEDIGGER

I'm the gravedigger. Don't apologize for not recognizing. People shouldn't pay much attention to me. If they did I'd be doing something wrong.

RABBI

You did a good job then. Being in the background and digging the grave. It seemed the right size.

GRAVEDIGGER

Thank you. Gravediggers aren't complimented very often. Usually mourners take us for granted. It was a simple, elegant service.

RABBI

Non-denominational. The Lord's Prayer. My... talk. Some shoveling of dirt. At least I didn't have to praise Jesus.

GRAVEDIGGER

Why would you?

RABBI

She was Catholic, at least by birth. How could you be Jewish with a name like Theresa Genovese?

GRAVEDIGGER

You were very emotional.

RABBI

It's not easy to do a eulogy when you know the... deceased. It's simple to find the words to say about someone you care for, but difficult to say them.

GRAVEDIGGER

A person who laughed.

RABBI

From her belly.

GRAVEDIGGER

And fiercely compassionate, loyal as a mother, a hard listener.

RABBI

Did you memorize my speech?

GRAVEDIGGER

Words stay with me. Especially powerful words.

RABBI

Is this how you have fun, gravedigger, listening to graveyard speeches?

GRAVEDIGGER

I read, for fun.

RABBI

Reader's Digest? How To Increase Your Word Power?

GRAVEDIGGER

Romantic novels. Plays. I own lots of books. I would like to know somebody like her. Who, "Had reverence for life and was revered by all who knew her, whose invisible life print is irrevocably imprinted in our hearts".

RABBI

And a lousy card player. I said that too. She was lousy at gin rummy, and lousy at canasta.

GRAVEDIGGER

From what you said about her, maybe she was the kind of person who would just let you win.

RABBI

Nonsense. She was just a lousy card player. It was embarrassing playing with her. She was even lousy at Go Fish.

GRAVEDIGGER

How can you be lousy at Go Fish?

RABBI

If you keep asking about the same card on each turn, you're lousy. A few nights before she died we played Go Fish.

GRAVEDIGGER

A kid's game?

RABBI

When you get older sometimes you want to be like kids. The cards kept falling from her frail trembling fingers. I tried not to look to see what cards they were, but sometimes I couldn't help it. As usual, I won.

GRAVEDIGGER

Why didn't you let her win?

RABBI

We always were honest with each other, even at the end. To let her win would have been cheating.

GRAVEDIGGER

I wish I had someone to play cards with. Poker. I think I would have liked to play poker at a round table, with a group...

RABBI

Sometimes when I'm asked to do a eulogy, I hardly know the deceased. I have to ask the names of the children and grandchildren, and keep a cheat sheet so I get the names straight during the service.

(GRAVEDIGGER picks up some trash or weeds, as he occasionally does throughout)

GRAVEDIGGER

You seem a little cynical now. You weren't cynical during the service.

RABBI

So call me a cynic! Call me anything you want. It doesn't matter.

GRAVEDIGGER

I'd call you a wonderful rabbi.

RABBI

I have a profession. The profession of rabbi!

GRAVEDIGGER

It must be gratifying to go purposefully through life in a profession where you help people. I don't always feel what I'm doing helps people. Sometimes I feel like what I'm doing is just a little too late.

RABBI

I don't spend all my time helping people. Part of being a rabbi is being a businessman. I have bills to pay -- my own as well as those of the temple, a cantor and a choir to keep happy, provocative sermons to prepare -- to keep my congregation awake.

GRAVEDIGGER

From what I've seen, you should have no problem with that.

RABBI

We must 'market' ourselves these days, give people a reason to use us, rather than some other rabbi, to officiate at ceremonies. Some of us specialize.

GRAVEDIGGER

Specialize?

RABBI

My specialty is Bar Mitzvahs. When a Jewish boy reaches the age of thirteen he says some ritual prayers and becomes a man.

GRAVEDIGGER

Jewish confirmation, right?

RABBI

Exactly. Nowadays, in this age of feminism, girls too want to become Bar Mitzvah. So, at the age of thirteen they say some ritual prayers, and they too become a man.

GRAVEDIGGER

That's hilarious.

RABBI

You want to know what's hilarious? The Bar Mitzvah parties the parents throw nowadays. It's important to them that the party has a theme. Like baseball. Or pirates. Pirates! The centerpieces are treasure chests filled with candy. The Jolly Roger flag hangs next to the Israeli flag. What have pirates got to do with being Jewish? Can you name a single Jewish pirate?

(Beat)

Okay, Blackbeard. But that's it! Can you imagine a Jewish pirate? Yo-ho-ho and a bottle of schnapps.

GRAVEDIGGER

You have such a wonderful sense of humor.

RABBI

Theresa took such pleasure in listening to me being funny. She asked me questions I could give a funny answer to. Sometimes she laughed at something I said that I didn't realize was funny until she laughed. Sometimes she laughed at things I said that weren't funny, to make me feel good.

GRAVEDIGGER

"A pillar of gaiety and grace."

RABBI

So I said. Me, the Happy Rabbi.

GRAVEDIGGER

You're not happy? I don't mean now. I know you just buried a friend, but generally?

RABBI

No.

GRAVEDIGGER

Why?

RABBI

Why should I tell you, gravedigger?

GRAVEDIGGER

Warren. My name is Warren. Because I asked.

RABBI

It's none of your business.

GRAVEDIGGER

Why are you still here? Everyone else has left the cemetery.

RABBI

Why are you here? Your job seems done.

GRAVEDIGGER

I told you... I wanted to thank you for the eulogy. Besides, I can neaten her resting place. The dirt, some of it spilled on the grass.

RABBI

I'm in mourning. What better place should I be at if I want to mourn? I thought I'd say a Jewish prayer over her grave. Mind leaving me with some privacy?

GRAVEDIGGER

Sometimes it's best to mourn in the presence of other people.

RABBI

Can't you see I'm mourning for myself too, damn it! Why don't you leave me alone?

GRAVEDIGGER

I noticed you're carrying a gun.

RABBI

When did you notice this?

GRAVEDIGGER

Before, as I was walking here to thank you for the eulogy.

RABBI

It's my business if I carry a gun.

GRAVEDIGGER

Are you afraid of someone? Something?

RABBI

That's why people carry around guns, isn't it?

GRAVEDIGGER

It's usually pretty safe at a cemetery.

RABBI

You never know where you'll find a terrorist. Lurking behind a bush. A sniper in a tree.

GRAVEDIGGER

I don't believe that.

RABBI

I want to scare some squirrels!

GRAVEDIGGER

Squirrels serve a balancing purpose here. We should treat them with respect.

RABBI

Neo-Nazis deface synagogues. We need to fight back.

GRAVEDIGGER

I don't think you mean to use the gun on anyone but yourself.

RABBI

Why would you say that?

GRAVEDIGGER

I heard your anguish during the eulogy.

RABBI

What better place to take your life than at a cemetery?

GRAVEDIGGER

You have too much of a sense of humor for you to kill yourself.

RABBI

Through the centuries a sense of humor has helped Jews survive. But our sense of humor didn't make the problems go away.

GRAVEDIGGER

A sense of humor may not eliminate problems, but it makes them easier to live with.

RABBI

Not for me! Not anymore! As a Jew my duty was to notice the world's absurdities. And I found the ultimate absurdity -- my life.

GRAVEDIGGER

So you will solve your problems by shooting yourself?

RABBI

I am a man of the temple.

GRAVEDIGGER

What has that got to do with it?

RABBI

I will shoot myself in the temple, on the side of the head. What more appropriate way for a rabbi to commit suicide.

GRAVEDIGGER

In many religions it's forbidden to take your own life.

RABBI

The final rule in the laws of Judaism is that all the other rules can be broken when there are extenuating circumstances. A Jew stranded on an island can eat a pig if he'll starve otherwise. An Orthodox Jew with a heart attack can ride an ambulance on the Sabbath.

GRAVEDIGGER

In both those cases it sounds like the rules are broken to prolong life.

RABBI

Another extenuating circumstance is when your mind is in unbearable pain with no hope of it going away.

GRAVEDIGGER

So, five, four, three, two, one, poof! But why would a rabbi, who does so much good, want to kill himself?

RABBI

I haven't done much good for years.

GRAVEDIGGER

But a rabbi...

RABBI

Years ago I lost the respect of the Jewish community here.

GRAVEDIGGER

What happened?

RABBI

You won't believe it.

GRAVEDIGGER

Try me.

RABBI

I was attending a Bar Mitzvah party with my wife. At least that one had a biblical theme -- the Ten Commandments. We walked to the place where they give you cards to tell you at which table you are to sit. Would you believe they assigned us the Thou Shalt Not Commit Adultery table. I told my wife to wait there, and I marched over to the hostess and demanded, "Mrs. Schwartz, I'm a rabbi and we are assigned to the Thou Shalt Not Commit Adultery table. How... did you find out?"

GRAVEDIGGER

What did she say?

RABBI

She said, "Rabbi, for years the whole congregation has known... your wife's been fooling around behind your back."

GRAVEDIGGER

Oh my!

RABBI

Soon afterwards I got rid of my wife -- by divorce -- and began living the single life.

GRAVEDIGGER

Really?

RABBI

No, it's just a story. I was never married. Are you single, gravedigger?

GRAVEDIGGER

Warren. Yes, I'm single. I've always been single. Lately I didn't have much time to meet people. I worked long hours. I was saving up to buy old books -- editions printed in the nineteenth century.

RABBI

Then you know how hard it can be, finding a mate. Can you imagine how hard it is for a single rabbi? I suppose I could have put an advertisement in the singles publication -- single, white rabbi in search of attractive soul-mate. Must know how to prepare gefilte fish. Shiksas acceptable if willing to convert.

GRAVEDIGGER

Shiksas? What is that?

RABBI

I thought you were literate. My Theresa was a shiksa, a non-Jewish woman.

GRAVEDIGGER

It's hard for me too, to meet a woman, to meet anyone. Working here is mostly solitary, without much interaction. After a while you stop bantering with your fellow diggers, and if I start talking with the dead, I'm in real trouble.

RABBI

I'd say so.

GRAVEDIGGER

Most women don't care to be with me for very long. I scare them off.

RABBI

I scare them off too.

GRAVEDIGGER

Why?

RABBI

The woman thinks she must be perfect. Besides, how many people are a good match for a rabbi?

GRAVEDIGGER

I suppose not many. You have to be Jewish.

RABBI

Yes. You can be a good friend to a rabbi, you can spend hours and hours with him, you can hold his hand and sleep with him and let him confide in you his troubles, and laugh with him over a game of Go Fish. But you cannot be a rabbi's official mate unless you are Jewish.

GRAVEDIGGER

You cared for that woman, Theresa, didn't you?

RABBI

I had my profession, which I wouldn't leave. But she said she didn't believe in any god, and wouldn't be hypocritical and convert.

GRAVEDIGGER

I believe in a Supreme Being, but I also believe in spirits.

RABBI

Ghosts? Ghouls?

GRAVEDIGGER

No. The spirits of people. Forces of life. Who knows where it comes from? Electricity. We know the body functions through the transformation of minute electrical impulses. Maybe these impulses survive, even when the body of the person is gone.

RABBI

What religion are you?

GRAVEDIGGER

Oh, none. Or maybe all. Religion is a very complex matter. But I respect them all. Sometimes on a quiet day or quiet night I sit here looking up into a vast sky and imagine I'm in an enormous cathedral, the size of the universe.

RABBI

Does it fill you with awe, or do you feel insignificant?

GRAVEDIGGER

Both.

RABBI

I don't believe I'm talking metaphysics with a gravedigger, moments before I kill myself.

GRAVEDIGGER

I'll have explaining to do if you kill yourself here. They might think I did it.

RABBI

I'll wait until you go in.

GRAVEDIGGER

They still might suspect me.

RABBI

I'll add an explanation to the note I'm leaving.

GRAVEDIGGER

You have a note?

RABBI

A brief one. "Dear World", it says. "Unfortunately circumstances are such that you will be better off without me. I leave all my religious books and artifacts to the temple. My remaining personal possessions and all valuables and money, which aren't much, considering a rabbi's compensation package these days, I leave to Theresa's daughter." Now I'll add, "And by the way, the Gravedigger didn't kill me. In fact, he was quite concerned that I'd go through with taking my life, nicely asked me to reconsider, and he is not to be regarded as a suspect or accessory." Is that satisfactory?