

# Washing the Dead

A short play

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2w/1 m. 1 act

ROSE has been washing the dead for years when she is joined by KATIE, a girl too young, too inexperienced and too interested in their young dead male corpse.

## CAST

Rose            older woman

Katie          younger woman

Corpse        younger man

## Time

In the past

## Setting

A table where they wash the dead

## \*Author's note

This play is inspired by the poem Washing the Corpse by Rainer Maria Rilke.

AT RISE:

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A young male corpse is laid out on a table covered with a white sheet. KATIE, a young woman, holds a lantern over his face, then takes his hand. ROSE, a coarse older woman, enters unseen surprising KATIE.

ROSE

He won't touch back.

KATIE

You frightened me to death.

(ROSE is inspecting her.)

Why are you staring.

ROSE

I was expecting someone a little older. But since you're here early, we can get started. This one's going to be trouble.

(ROSE hands KATIE her apron.)

KATIE

Why would you say that? Just look at his sweet face.

ROSE

Sweet in life maybe. Dead he's just more work.

KATIE

His hands are still warm.

ROSE

They just cut him down, girl. He'll get cold soon enough.

KATIE

You are sure he's dead?

ROSE

I'm sure he's not getting up off that table.

(ROSE hands an apron to KATIE, then pours some liquid onto a sponge and hands it to her.)

Here. I got no favorite parts, but feet ain't one of them.

KATIE

(KATIE wipes her eyes, then cries out in pain.)

Oh, Lord, what poison's in that sponge.

ROSE

Here's some water. Wash them out good.

KATIE

I tell you I'm going blind.

(CONTINUED)

ROSE

You're not going blind. Didn't they teach you not to touch your eyes?

KATIE

What did you put in that sponge? It smells like vinegar.

ROSE

Of course it's vinegar. That's what we use. Were you expecting whiskey?

KATIE

It's terrible.

ROSE

Give this boy a few more hours in this heat and you'll know what terrible smells like. I thought Anna said she was sending a woman with experience, but you're neither. And they call me Rose, if you're staying.

(ROSE starts to wash the neck and face.)

KATIE

(Pause) My name's Katie. I didn't mean to be trouble.

ROSE

No trouble for me. (To the corpse) Any trouble for you, boy? He says you're no trouble which is good since you don't want the dead mad at you till they're in the ground. Is your name like that song, "Katie bar the door"? I can sing that one drunk or sober, but I'll bet you've heard that before.

KATIE

Drunk and sober.

ROSE

You like a joke. Good. You need jokes down here. Sometimes you'll even get a rise from them if you know what I mean.

(ROSE pulls out a flask and takes a swig.)

A drink helps too, but don't think I'm not working if I'm drinking. No matter what, Rose does her job. They'll put that on my stone. Some ladies say it's not polite to touch your lips direct to the bottle. I say let them come and wash some bones, then we'll see who's drinking what.

(ROSE takes a swig, wipes her mouth, then wipes the top on her skirt and offers it to KATIE.)

KATIE

It's a little early for me.

ROSE

I say if it's not too early to die, it's not too early to drink. A good rule unless you're living with a tea toteller.

(CONTINUED)

KATIE

I live with my father and he's never touched tea.

ROSE

Ah, I had one of those father's myself. I live alone now, just me and old Sooty. I bring her down here sometimes to catch the mice. She's good company. You like cats?

KATIE

(There is an odd sound and KATIE jumps.)

What was that?

(KATIE is shaking.)

ROSE

I can't say but I can see you shaking. Put this sweater on.

KATIE

It sounded like a whisper.

ROSE

Maybe.

KATIE

I never heard anything like it before.

ROSE

Probably just him talking.

KATIE

You said he was dead. How can he be talking if he's dead?

ROSE

They got their ways of letting you know they're here even when they're halfway there. First time one of them let something out I was almost dead on this floor. But you get used to it. You'll see.

(ROSE starts washing his neck.)

This one's neck is too broke from that rope he tied around his neck to be living. Makes you wonder what made him want to leave this life so young.

KATIE

I heard it was robbers.

ROSE

Listen and look and they'll always tell you all you need to know.

KATIE

Murdering thieves done this. They must have told you that when they brought him in.

(CONTINUED)

ROSE

It's a good story to get him buried in the church yard girl, but you look here and here again and you can still see where the rope cut into his fingers and palms. There was no struggle. No, he was willing and there weren't no others to help.

KATIE

You can't be sure.

ROSE

There's two ends to a rope and a story to go with both.

KATIE

Why would he have done such a thing to himself. Look at how beautiful he is.

ROSE

I guess he wasn't beautiful enough. The boys who cut him down said some girl refused his marriage proposal two days ago and that's reason enough for some his age.

KATIE

You've got no right to speak like it was the truth.

ROSE

If you want the truth ask God 'cause the Lord stopped talking to Rose years ago but I'll wash him the same way no matter how he died, you can be sure of that. Rose will wash him good as anyone. (Pause) Now get back to your work if we're going to get out of here today.

(KATIE goes back to her work carefully. ROSE pulls up the sheet and smiles.)

Now here's some truth you can't argue with. This one's got a sweet set of jewels. Have you seen a grown man naked before?

KATIE

Stop it! You've no right.

ROSE

Then I'll bet you haven't seen one naked dead or alive.

KATIE

It's a sin looking like that at the dead like that and work talking about him.

ROSE

If you work here you have to look and if you have to look this one's a fine man to start with.

(KATIE takes off her apron.)

Where are you going now? We're almost to the middle.

(KATIE picks to leave and ROSE stops her.)

(CONTINUED)

ROSE (cont'd)

No, no, no, you can't go and leave me all alone and him half done. Don't you see it's just old Rose talking. Nothing serious. Just words flying out of this big yap and into the air. It don't mean nothing. You can see that can't you? Don't go Miss Katie, not when we're just getting along so well. Please? The work's not bad and someone's always dying. You'll be a Queen with no one to give you orders. I swear the dead never hurt you or talk you down till you want to lie on that table yourself. Stay Miss Katie. Just today, stay for him if not for me. He's young and sweet, you said that yourself. Look at that face? He's just a boy waiting for that final touch and then he's off forever and a day. I know he'd rather have that last touch come from the soft hands of a pretty young girl like you, not some rough old cow named Rose. You were doing so well, girl. Please, stay here and I swear you won't hear another word come out of this mouth till it's done and you've been paid. You'll see, if you stay, old Rose will be quiet as a church mouse.

(ROSE locks her lips then holds out KATIE's apron. KATIE takes the apron and grabs her sponge. ROSE starts to sing. )

Singing don't count the same as talk.

(ROSE continues singing. Suddenly KATIE stops.)

KATIE

If he'd killed himself there'd be a note.

ROSE

Maybe.

KATIE

If that story about the girl was true he'd have left something behind for her. Some note to tell her good-bye. Did you find something?

ROSE

(ROSE keeps working without responding to the question.)

You know I had a woman once worked for me once who couldn't stand washing babies. She'd cry so hard I'd send her home and wash them all myself. I never had babies so it was nothing to me. (pause) Did you know him?

KATIE

Why would you ask me that?

ROSE

I'm curious, like my old cat Sooty. Found him almost dead in a coal bin so I figure he's still got eight more to lose. Personally, I'm not even sure I'd want all those lives. (Pause) Did you say you did know this boy?

(CONTINUED)

KATIE

Oh, Jesus, Lord, he's turning cold!

ROSE

That's what they do. First they stop breathing, then it's cold and stiff. It's nothing to be afraid of. Just going back to the earth.

(ROSE is now burning spices in a dish and sprinkling oil on the body and chanting.)

And when the sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Father I entrust my spirit into your hands....Father.... Salome, had bought sweet spices, that they might come and anoint him. Father, I entrust my spirit into your hands....

KATIE

What are you doing?

ROSE

Everyone deserves to meet their maker smelling good. I had to wash a man once whose back was crooked as a road. He died sitting at his table drinking his whiskey. Didn't find him for two days and then he was bound to sit up forever. They had to tie him into the box to get him to lay flat, but his friends didn't like himself all cleaned up and flat so they cut those ropes, one, two, three, right there in the middle of his wake. Up he shoots like a puppet. It spooked the sober and the drunk ones till they ran from the house screaming. Spooked the whole lot of them till there was screaming and running like this town's never seen. Some say he would have liked that ending. (pause) If you stay at this and your washing long enough to take care of me, don't bother tying me down if I die upright. No one will be there to mourn anyway. I hear this one had no family and that is a sin.

(There is the sound of a bell ringing.)

Jesus, Mary and Joseph stop your ringing. We're working here!

(Bell rings again.)

I've got to answer that door. You keep working.

(KATIE watches ROSE leave, then runs to the man's clothes hanging up. She searches through his pockets when ROSE returns unseen. )

So, are you here to rob me or him?

KATIE

I'm here to work.

ROSE

There's nothing I hate more than a thief -- except a liar.

KATIE

You needed a helper.

ROSE

Who are you?

(CONTINUED)

KATIE

I'll do anything you want if you'll just let me stay.

ROSE

Why would I ask you to stay when the woman that was supposed to be here, a woman with experience, was down there at my door. She knew the name of the woman who sent her. Do you?

KATIE

There must be some mistake.

ROSE

The mistake was me not asking who you were when I found you here in the first place.

KATIE

I thought you were happy with my work.

ROSE

There's nothing happy about working here. I was lonely. I needed a helper. I thought you were the woman with experience they were sending over but you weren't.

KATIE

You said it was working out well. You asked me to stay.

ROSE

Why are you here and what do you want from me? I won't hear you lie three times so tell me the truth or get the hell out.

KATIE

(long pause) I didn't come to do anybody harm.

ROSE

I'll be the judge of that.

KATIE

His name is John.

ROSE

Then you did know him?

KATIE

Yes.

ROSE

But you didn't come to rob him.

KATIE

I came to say good-bye.

ROSE

They said he had no kin.

(CONTINUED)



KATIE

We were to be married.

ROSE

They said the girl refused him.

KATIE

I did refuse him.

ROSE

Because you found someone else?

KATIE

There was no one else.

ROSE

Then why did you say no?

KATIE

To save his life.

ROSE

You make no sense.

KATIE

I told him no so my father wouldn't shoot him, that's the hate he holds his people in his heart. I told him no so he could live and be happy and leave this place if he had to find someone to love. I told him no so I wouldn't have to be his widow.

ROSE

What were you looking for in his pockets?

KATIE

A note. If he died by his own hand then he would have left me some word.

ROSE

What does that matter now?

KATIE

If he killed himself then everything I did was wrong.

ROSE

He loved you enough to go up against your father?

KATIE

It wasn't a choice. I told him I didn't care.

ROSE

You lied.

(CONTINUED)

KATIE

I lied to let him live.

(KATIE searches the pockets frantically.)

If there's no note I'll have his last kiss and that will be enough for me.

ROSE

Then take your kiss before his lips turn to ice. He left nothing. Kiss him and leave and find some love in this life while you're still young and pretty. He didn't leave you anything. It was robbers that strung him up.

KATIE

What about his fingers? You said they could tell a story.

ROSE

And I can tell you ten other stories to go with that if you stay. I told you, when you're here you give them life even if it's not true. Now kiss him and leave me to my work.

KATIE

You wouldn't lie?

ROSE

Does this face look like it could lie?

(KATIE goes to the boy and ROSE turns away as  
KATIE goes to kiss him and then stops.)

KATIE

I can't leave him. I thought I could. Please just leave me here to die too?

ROSE

You'll leave him and you won't die. Rose won't wash two here. You'll kiss him and go home, or leave that man you call your father and make your way out of this place, but you'll leave him with Rose and I'll be good to him. You'll kiss him and leave the boy with me and God.

KATIE

You're sure it was robbers?

ROSE

I'm sure he'll be in heaven when you come.

KATIE

Good night John. You were the first and you will be the last.  
(KATIE kisses the boy.)

ROSE

Here's your money, then. You did your work.

(CONTINUED)

KATIE

I can't take your money.

ROSE

I don't ask twice. It's enough to get you away from here if that's a choice.

KATIE

You know what you're saying?

ROSE

I know how I got to this place. Don't spend another life time here. They'll bless him proper and bury him right. You go. There's no reason for both our lives to smell of cider.

KATIE

This is more money than I earned.

ROSE

Part are the coins I took from his eyes when you weren't looking. They should be yours. The rest is nothing to me. Go, I won't ask twice.

(KATIE looks back at the boy one more time then turns and runs out. ROSE stands a long time and then goes over to the boy's body.)

She loved you. That you'll have forever. And may you meet in the hereafter.

(ROSE takes a slip of paper from her pocket. She reads it over silently moving her lips, then crosses herself and rips the note into pieces. She walks to the candle, and takes the pieces of paper and sets them into a bowl and then sets them on fire.)

Ashes to ashes....dust to dust. Amen.

BLACK OUT