ACT 5 SCENE 1

*A GRAVEDIGGER and the OTHER**gravedigger enter.*

**GRAVEDIGGER**

Are they really going to give her a Christian burial after she killed herself?

**OTHER**

I’m telling you, yes. So finish that grave right away. The coroner examined her case and says it should be a Christian funeral.

**GRAVEDIGGER**

But how, unless she drowned in self-defense?

**OTHER**

That’s what they’re saying she did.

**GRAVEDIGGER**

Sounds more like “self-offense,” if you ask me. What I’m saying is, if she knew she was drowning herself, then that’s an act. An act has three sides to it: to do, to act, and to perform. Therefore she must have known she was drowning herself.

**OTHER**

No, listen here, gravedigger sir—

**GRAVEDIGGER**

Let me finish. Here’s the water, right? And here’s a man, okay? If the man goes into the water and drowns himself, he’s the one doing it, like it or not. But if the water comes to him and drowns him, then he doesn’t drown himself. Therefore, he who is innocent of his own death does not shorten his own life.

**OTHER**

Is that how the law sees it?

**GRAVEDIGGER**

It sure is. The coroner’s inquest law.

**OTHER**

Do you want to know the truth? If this woman hadn’t been rich, she wouldn’t have been given a Christian burial.

**GRAVEDIGGER**

Well there, now you’ve said it. It’s a pity that the rich have more freedom to hang or drown themselves than the rest of us Christians. Come on, shovel. The most ancient aristocrats in the world are gardeners, ditch-diggers, and gravediggers. They keep up Adam’s profession.

**OTHER**

Was he an aristocrat? With a coat of arms?

**GRAVEDIGGER**

He was the first person who ever had arms.

**OTHER**

He didn’t have any.

**GRAVEDIGGER**

What, aren’t you a Christian? The Bible says Adam dug in the ground. How could he dig without arms? I’ll ask you another question. If you can’t answer it—

**OTHER**

Go ahead!

**GRAVEDIGGER**

What do you call a person who builds stronger things than a stonemason, a shipbuilder, or a carpenter does?

**OTHER**

The one who builds the gallows to hang people on, since his structure outlives a thousand inhabitants.

**GRAVEDIGGER**

You’re funny, and I like that. The gallows do a good job. But how? It does a good job for those who do bad.

Now, it’s wrong to say that the gallows are stronger than a church. Therefore, the gallows may do you some good. Come on, your turn.

**OTHER**

Let’s see, “Who builds stronger things than a stonemason, a shipbuilder, or a carpenter?”

**GRAVEDIGGER**

That’s the question, so answer it.

**OTHER**

Ah, I’ve got it!

**GRAVEDIGGER**

Go ahead.

**OTHER**

Damn, I forgot.

*HAMLET and HORATIO**enter in the distance.*

**GRAVEDIGGER**

Don’t beat your brains out over it. You can’t make a slow donkey run by beating it. The next time someone asks you this riddle, say “a gravedigger.” The houses he makes last till Judgment Day. Now go and get me some booze.

*The OTHER GRAVEDIGGER**exits.*

*(the* **GRAVEDIGGER** *digs and sings)*

In my youth I loved, I loved,

And I thought it was very sweet

To set—ohh—the date for—ahh—my duty

Oh, I thought it—ahh—was not right.

**HAMLET**

Doesn’t this guy realize what he’s doing? He’s singing while digging a grave.

**HORATIO**

He’s gotten so used to graves that they don’t bother him anymore.

**HAMLET**

Yes, exactly. Only people who don’t have to work can afford to be sensitive.

**GRAVEDIGGER**

*(sings)*

But old age has sneaked up on me

And grabbed me in his claws,

And has shipped me into the ground

As if I’d never been like that.

*(he throws up a skull)*

**HAMLET**

That skull had a tongue in it once and could sing. That jackass is throwing it around as if it belonged to Cain, who did the first murder! It might be the skull of a politician once capable of talking his way around God, right? And now this idiot is pulling rank on him.

**HORATIO**

Indeed, my lord.

**HAMLET**

Or a courtier, who could say things like, “Good night, my sweet lord! How are you doing, good lord?” This might be the skull of Lord So-and-So, who praised Lord Such-and-Such’s horse when he wanted to borrow it, right?

**HORATIO**

Yes, my lord.

**HAMLET**

Exactly. And now it’s the property of Lady Worm, its lower jaw knocked off and thwacked on the noggin with a shovel. That’s quite a reversal of fortune, isn’t it, if we could only see it? Are these bones worth nothing more than bowling pins now? It makes my bones ache to think about it.

**GRAVEDIGGER**

*(sings)*

A pickax and a shovel, a shovel,

And a sheet for a funeral shroud,

Oh, a pit of dirt is what we need

For a guest like this one here.

*(he throws up another skull)*

**HAMLET**

There’s another. Could that be a lawyer’s skull? Where’s all his razzle-dazzle legal jargon now? Why does he allow this idiot to knock him on the head with a dirty shovel, instead of suing him for assault and battery? Maybe this guy was once a great landowner, with his deeds and contracts, his tax shelters and his annuities. Is it part of his deed of ownership to have his skull filled up with dirt? Does he only get to keep as much land as a set of contracts would cover if you spread them out on the ground? The deeds to his properties would barely fit in this coffin—and the coffin’s all the property he gets to keep?

**HORATIO**

No more than that, my lord.

**HAMLET**

Isn’t the parchment of a legal document made of sheepskin?

**HORATIO**

Yes, my lord, and calfskin too.

**HAMLET**

Anyone who puts his trust in such documents is a sheep or a calf. I’ll talk to this guy.—Excuse me, sir, whose grave is this?

**GRAVEDIGGER**

It’s mine, sir.

*(sings)*

Oh, a pit of dirt is what we need

For a guest like this one here.

**HAMLET**

I think it really must be yours, since you’re the one lying in it.

**GRAVEDIGGER**

And you’re lying outside of it, so it’s not yours. As for me, I’m not lying to you in it—it’s really mine.

**HAMLET**

But you are lying in it, being in it and saying it’s yours. It’s for the dead, not the living. So you’re lying.

**GRAVEDIGGER**

That’s a lively lie, sir—it jumps so fast from me to you.

**HAMLET**

What man are you digging it for?

**GRAVEDIGGER**

For no man, sir.

**HAMLET**

What woman, then?

**GRAVEDIGGER**

For no woman, either.

**HAMLET**

Who’s to be buried in it?

**GRAVEDIGGER**

One who used to be a woman but—bless her soul—is dead now.   
  
**HAMLET**

How literal this guy is! We have to speak precisely, or he’ll get the better of us with his wordplay. Lord, Horatio, I’ve been noticing this for a few years now. The peasants have become so clever and witty that they’re nipping at the heels of noblemen.—How long have you been a gravedigger?

**GRAVEDIGGER**

Of all the days in the year, I started the day that the late King Hamlet defeated Fortinbras.

**HAMLET**

How long ago was that?

**GRAVEDIGGER**

You don’t know that? Any fool could tell you, it was the day that young Hamlet was born—the one who went crazy and got sent off to England.

**HAMLET**

Why was he sent to England?

**GRAVEDIGGER**

Because he was crazy. He’ll recover his sanity there. Or if he doesn’t, it won’t matter in England.

**HAMLET**

Why not?

**GRAVEDIGGER**

Because nobody will notice he’s crazy. Everyone there is as crazy as he is.

**HAMLET**

How did he go crazy?

**GRAVEDIGGER**

In a strange way, they say.

**HAMLET**

What do you mean, “in a strange way”?

**GRAVEDIGGER**

By losing his mind.

**HAMLET**

On what grounds?

**GRAVEDIGGER**

Right here in Denmark. I’ve been the church warden here for thirty years, since childhood.

**HAMLET**

How long will a man lie in his grave before he starts to rot?

**GRAVEDIGGER**

Well, if he’s not rotten before he dies (and there are a lot of people now who are so rotten they start falling to pieces even before you put them in the coffin), he’ll last eight or nine years. A leathermaker will last nine years.

**HAMLET**

Why does he last longer?

**GRAVEDIGGER**

Because his hide is so leathery from his trade that he keeps the water off him a long time, and water is what makes your goddamn body rot more than anything. Here’s a skull that’s been here twenty three years.

**HAMLET**

Whose was it?

**GRAVEDIGGER**

A crazy bastard. Who do you think?

**HAMLET**

I really don’t know.

**GRAVEDIGGER**

Damn that crazy madman! He poured a pitcher of white wine on my head once. This is the skull of Yorick, the king’s jester.

**HAMLET**

This one?

**GRAVEDIGGER**

Yes, that one.

**HAMLET**

Let me see. *(he takes the skull)* Oh, poor Yorick! I used to know him, Horatio—a very funny guy, and with an excellent imagination. He carried me on his back a thousand times, and now—how terrible—this is him. It makes my stomach turn. I don’t know how many times I kissed the lips that used to be right here. Where are your jokes now? Your pranks? Your songs? Your flashes of wit that used to set the whole table laughing? You don’t make anybody smile now. Are you sad about that? You need to go to my lady’s room and tell her that no matter how much makeup she slathers on, she’ll end up just like you some day. That’ll make her laugh. Horatio, tell me something.

**HORATIO**

What’s that, my lord?

**HAMLET**

Do you think Alexander the Great looked like this when he was buried?

**HORATIO**

Exactly like that.

**HAMLET**

And smelled like that, too? Whew! *(he puts down the skull)*

**HORATIO**

Just as bad, my lord.

**HAMLET**

How low we can fall, Horatio. Isn’t it possible to imagine that the noble ashes of Alexander the Great could end up plugging a hole in a barrel?

**HORATIO**

If you thought that you’d be thinking too much.

**HAMLET**

No, not at all. Just follow the logic: Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returned to dust, the dust is dirt, and dirt makes mud we use to stop up holes. So why can’t someone plug a beer barrel with the dirt that used to be Alexander? The great emperor Caesar, dead and turned to clay, might plug up a hole to keep the wind away. Oh, to think that the same body that once ruled the world could now patch up a wall! But quiet, be quiet a minute.

*CLAUDIUS enters with GERTRUDE, LAERTES, and a coffin, with a PRIEST**and other lords and attendants.*

Here comes the king, the queen, and the noblemen of court. Who are they following? And with such a plain and scrawny ceremony? It means the corpse they’re following took its own life. Must have been from a wealthy family. Let’s stay and watch a while.

*HAMLET and HORATIO**step aside.*

**LAERTES**

What other rites are you going to give her?

**HAMLET**

That’s Laertes, a very noble young man. Listen.

**LAERTES**

What other rites are you going to give her?

**PRIEST**

I’ve performed as many rites as I’m permitted. Her death was suspicious, and were it not for the fact that the king gave orders to bury her here, she’d have been buried outside the church graveyard. She deserves to have rocks and stones thrown on her body. But she has had prayers read for her and is dressed up like a pure virgin, with flowers tossed on her grave and the bell tolling for her.

**LAERTES**

Isn’t there any other rite you can perform?

**PRIEST**

No, nothing. We would profane the other dead souls here if we sang the same requiem for her that we sang for them.

**LAERTES**

Lay her in the ground, and let violets bloom from her lovely and pure flesh! I’m telling you, you jerk priest, my sister will be an angel in heaven while you’re howling in hell.

**HAMLET**

(*to* HORATIO) What, the beautiful Ophelia?

**GERTRUDE**

Sweet flowers for a sweet girl. Goodbye! (she scatters flowers) I once hoped you’d be my Hamlet’s wife. I thought I’d be tossing flowers on your wedding bed, my sweet girl, not on your grave.

**LAERTES**

Oh, damn three times, damn ten times the evil man whose wicked deed deprived you of your ingenious mind. Hold off burying her until I’ve caught her in my arms once more.

*(he jumps into the grave)*

Now pile the dirt onto the living and the dead alike, till you’ve made a mountain higher than Mount Pelion or Mount Olympus.

**HAMLET**

*(coming forward)* Who is the one whose grief is so loud and clear, whose words of sadness make the planets stand still in the heavens as if they’ve been hurt by what they’ve heard? It’s me, Hamlet the Dane. *(he jumps into the grave)*

**LAERTES**

To hell with your soul!

*HAMLET and LAERTES**wrestle with each other.*

**HAMLET**

That’s no way to pray. *(they fight)* Please take your hands off my throat. I may not be rash and quick to anger, but I have something dangerous in me which you should beware of. Take your hands off.

**CLAUDIUS**

Pull them apart.

**GERTRUDE**

Hamlet! Hamlet!

**ALL**

Gentlemen!

**HORATIO**

(*to* HAMLET) Please, my lord, calm down.

*Attendants separate HAMLET and LAERTES.*

**HAMLET**

I’ll fight him over this issue till I don’t have the strength to blink.

**GERTRUDE**

Oh, my son, what issue is that?

**HAMLET**

I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers, if you added all their love together, couldn’t match mine. What are you going to do for her?

**CLAUDIUS**

Oh, he’s crazy, Laertes!

**GERTRUDE**

For the love of God, be patient with him.

**HAMLET**

Damn it, show me what you’re going to do for her. Will you cry? Fight? Stop eating? Cut yourself? Drink vinegar? Eat a crocodile? I’ll do all that. Did you come here to whine? To outdo me by jumping into her grave so theatrically? To be buried alive with her? So will I. And if you rattle on about mountains, then let them throw millions of acres over us. It will be so high a peak that it scrapes against heaven and makes Mount Ossa look like a wart. See? I can talk crazy as well as you.

**GERTRUDE**

This is pure insanity. He’ll be like this for a little while. Then he’ll be as calm and quiet as a dove waiting for her eggs to hatch.

**HAMLET**

Listen, sir, why do you treat me like this? I always loved you. But it doesn’t matter. Even a hero like Hercules can’t keep cats from acting like cats, and dogs like dogs.

*HAMLET**exits.*

**CLAUDIUS**

Please, Horatio, go with him.

*HORATIO**exits.*

(*to* LAERTES) Don’t forget our talk last night, and try to be patient. We’ll take care of this problem soon.—Gertrude, have the guards keep an eye on your son. A monument shall be built for Ophelia that will last forever, I promise. We’ll have the quiet we need soon. In the meantime, let’s proceed patiently.

They exit.