

The Glamour House

by

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For Esther

And for all the displaced people and the worlds they make.

Characters

Trudi Stein. Owner of The Glamour House, late 40's, early-mid 50's.

Esther Bayer. A salesgirl, 20's.

Rosa Perez. The dress shop alteration-hand, 50's.

Liselotte Pauschel. A customer of some means, 40's.

Tony Puccini. A one-handed customer, late 20's.

Setting

New York City. Late 1946. The Glamour House, a dress shop on the Upper East Side. The set should contain a shop entrance, cash register and counter, an alteration station with sewing machine, a dressing booth with curtain and mirror and separate exits to the shop's office and storage room. Along the walls are racks of dresses, skirts and suits by size and style as well as bins with rack-structures holding blouses and house dresses. Mannequins, both seated and standing, occupy spaces in the shop windows and on the shop floor.

Notes

Although the dress shop contains many necessarily real material things, the world is anything but mundane. It need not look like an ordinary shop. Many of the objects in it, including certain items of clothing and the mannequins play roles in the story and, at the same time, cast a super-natural dimension through their presence. Sound effects such as the constant working of the sewing machine also resonate to heighten the world of the play. And silence plays as large a role as dialogue.

The characters in this play are immigrants. They come from somewhere else. This is revealed in their speech to varying degrees.

SAMPLE SCENE

Scene

(ROSA works at her station. TRUDI and ESTHER BAYER face each other.)

TRUDI

You're too thin.

ESTHER

Forgive me.

TRUDI

My customers. They tip the scales. You'll only depress them.

ESTHER

I'll try my very best to please them.

TRUDI

The point is. I do need help.

ESTHER

And here I am.

TRUDI

I see that.

ESTHER

'Help wanted,' on the door. I stepped inside.

TRUDI

(studying her) My husband passed away. Three months ago.

ESTHER

I am so sorry.

TRUDI

He did the books. I sold the dresses.

ESTHER

It must be very hard, alone.

TRUDI

I have survived.

ESTHER

Yes. That's the main thing.

TRUDI

(quickly) Here we don't ask questions. Where. When. How. We start with today. The present tense.

ESTHER

. . . All right.

TRUDI

In America. We look ahead. We don't look back.

ESTHER

I see.

TRUDI

It's a salesgirl's wage. No more. No less.

ESTHER

I'm grateful for it.

TRUDI

We work Saturdays, too. Are you willing?

ESTHER

I am.

TRUDI

Ten to seven, six days a week. On Sunday, you rest.

ESTHER

I understand.

TRUDI

And we speak English here.

ESTHER

I am prepared.

TRUDI

You've worked in sales?

ESTHER

Well . . . *no*.

TRUDI

No. I wouldn't have thought so.

ESTHER

(excitedly) The fact is—

TRUDI

No. (finger to lips) Leave it. *Now*, you are a salesgirl. That's all. That's it.

(stepping out into the center of the shop)

A customer enters. You wait. Three seconds. One . . . two . . . three. You move forward.

(She is moving through the paces. ESTHER follows and imitates her.)

“May I help you?” you ask.

ESTHER

(trying it) “May I help you?”

TRUDI

They'll want something. That's why they're here. A party dress. A dress for dancing. A birthday, a funeral, a wedding. A new season arrives. A new job comes along. A uniform needs replacing. We get a lot of office girls. They'll want a suit. Or stockings. A big selling item. The housewives come for house-dresses. The maids on Fifth, Irish girls. Paid on Friday. Love a night out. A special dress. Like what they see in magazines. They want glamour.

(moving to the racks)

You'll need a size. To which you'll lead them. You stand back. Two paces.

(She does so. ESTHER imitates.) One. Two.

You give them time. Four, five seconds. One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . five. You ask a question: "Anything special in mind?"

ESTHER

(imitating) "Anything special in mind?"

TRUDI

You make a comment: "The new fuller skirts are selling like wildfire." "Taffeta is all the rage."

ESTHER

"The new fuller skirts are selling like wildfire." "Taffeta is all the rage."

TRUDI

You get a dress into their hands. You flatter them. You direct them to the dressing booth.

(TRUDI moves through the motions, leading the way back to the dressing booth. ESTHER follows suit.)

You help them in. You wait.

ESTHER

Five seconds?

TRUDI

Five.

TOGETHER

One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . five.

TRUDI

From right here. You call out: (cupping her hands to her mouth, in a refined, velvety tone) “Everything all right?”

ESTHER

(imitating the tone and the cupped hands) “Everything all right?”

TRUDI

“Let me know if I can be of help!”

ESTHER

“Let me know if I can be of help!”

TRUDI

(stepping back from the dressing booth.)

The dress looks beautiful. It always does. “What a color on you.” “It suits you like it was made for you.” “That’s just your style.”

ESTHER

“What a color on you.” “It suits you like it was made for you.” “That’s just your style.”

TRUDI

“How slenderizing!”

ESTHER

“Slenderizing”?

TRUDI

That’s what they want. Our women. To look as though food never passed their lips.

(shrugs)

Maybe they need a size larger. Rarely, a size smaller. Another color. But the golden rule is: *They do not leave the shop without a dress.* The dress moves. From the rack, to the booth, onto her body. Into the shopping bag. Out onto the streets of New York City. And home. Each dress. Each skirt. Each suit. Has a home somewhere out there.

(becoming businesslike, once more)

You’ll need to learn the shop. The stock. The pricing. There is an order here. (gesturing to ROSA) This is Miss Perez. My seamstress.

ROSA

Good day to you, dear.

(ESTHER takes ROSA in and is about to respond, when TRUDI continues, briskly.)

TRUDI

Pay, we’ll start tomorrow. If it works out. Today you watch me. How it happens. In sales.

(eyeing ESTHER as she moves away to remove her hat)

What’s your name, by the way?

ESTHER

Esther. Esther Bayer.

TRUDI

Miss Bayer. Choose yourself an outfit.

ESTHER

How kind of you!

TRUDI

A salesgirl must look smart.

(ESTHER removes her jacket. There is a number tattooed on her arm. TRUDI studies her, suddenly disturbed.)

Please. Long sleeves. You understand.

ESTHER

I understand.

TRUDI

A salesgirl must look respectable.

(The shop door opens. ESTHER quickly slips her jacket back on. MRS. PAUSCHEL enters. TRUDI signals ESTHER to watch her. MRS. PAUSCHEL is a large, very blonde woman in late middle-age. As ESTHER watches, she counts the timing and pacing to herself and mouths the lines.)

MRS. PAUSCHEL

Good morning, ladies!

TRUDI & ESTHER

Good morning.

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