

WHEN DEATH COMES A KNOCKIN'

by Michael Soetaert

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A Comedic Duet

by **Michael Soetaert**

SYNOPSIS: Help Wanted: Death, aka, The Grim Reaper. Flexible hours, competitive pay. Need not be dead to apply. Seriously. It's not that bad of a job... except if you want to quit.

TIME: Present.

SETTING: Silas's front porch.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(2 either)

SILAS/CANDANCE FATTALLI (m/f) Middle-age tax preparer.
(75 lines)

DEATH (m/f) Middle-age. He's really trying hard to keep positive about his job... but it is Death we're talking about, which does put a pall on everything. Ramone if male; Raquelle if female. *(77 lines)*

CASTING NOTE: The play was written for two males, but it could just as easily be two females, or one each. Those minor changes to pronouns within the script are pre-approved.

TIME: It's later than you think. Other than that, it's present day, in particular, a Thursday evening, just after supper... that time of the evening when you're looking for something to do before it's late enough to go to bed.

SET

The front porch of Silas's house. And it shouldn't be that big of a porch. The rest of the stage should be black curtains. The idea is that the world that used to lie outside the front door, at least as far as Silas is concerned, is no longer there.

COSTUMING

DEATH – Dresses business-casual: khaki pants, pastel shirt, cheap suit coat, but no tie. Overall, not too terribly concerned about appearance.

SILAS – It's the evening, so he's comfortable: house shoes, sweat pants, sweat shirt.

PROPS

- briefcase (big enough to fit a death shroud in)
- kitchen timer
- business card with "Death" written on it (a black card with white writing would be fun)
- "participation" ribbon
- cell phone
- death shroud (in the briefcase)

DIRECTOR'S NOTES

This is a very simple play, truly requiring no set or props at all, or even a curtain, as far as that goes, making it perfect for a contest piece.

AT START: *The stage is in darkness, except for a wide spot on SILAS'S front porch. The lighting will not change throughout the play, leaving the rest of the stage in shadows. DEATH enters Right, carrying a briefcase, which he sets on the ground out of the way before knocking on the door, which SILAS will answer.*

DEATH: Mr. Silas Fattalli?

SILAS: Yes?

DEATH: Good evening. My name is Ramone, and I'm here on behalf of SNOR—the Society for National Oratorical Recitation. And I'm proud to announce that you've been chosen to give the keynote address at this year's National Convention.

SILAS: *(Terrified.)* What?!

In his consternation, SILAS steps out, and subtly the door closes behind him.

DEATH: And quite an honor it is. You will be delivering a ten minute speech, live, in front of 100,000 people. And millions more who will be tuning in at home on their televisions.

SILAS: You can't be serious!

DEATH: I'm dead serious.

SILAS: *(Panicking.)* I... I can't do that! I can't get up there in front of all those people... and talk... for ten minutes. I... I just can't!

DEATH: Relax, Mr. Fattalli. You don't have to.

SILAS: Really?

DEATH: Really. Relax. *(Beat.)* Actually, I'm Death.

SILAS: Death?

DEATH: With a capital "D." *(Taking out a kitchen timer and running it ahead until it "dings.")* And your time is up.

SILAS: What was all that about having to give a speech?

DEATH: I just tell people that bit about having to give a speech so death doesn't seem quite as bad.

SILAS: You're kidding?

DEATH: Nope. See. Here's my card. *(Gives business card to SILAS.)*

SILAS: *(Reading.)* "Death."

DEATH: Pretty much sums it up.

SILAS: Death? Like the Grim Reaper?

DEATH: Well... not really. I mean, technically, yes, I suppose. But let's not get caught up in stereotypes. I find that thinking of myself as being "grim" is just depressing.

SILAS: Depressing?! You're worried about being depressed? You're not the one dying!

DEATH: Technically, neither are you.

SILAS: (*Suddenly hopeful.*) What?! I'm not dying?

DEATH: Naw. You're already dead. But that's just picking nits, don't you think?

SILAS: Then you *are* Death.

DEATH: In the flesh.

SILAS: But you don't look like Death.

DEATH: Had a lot of experience with Death, now, have you? (*Beat.*) Listen. I get it. And I blame Hollywood. They portray Death as some ghoul in a black shroud with a limited vocabulary, so that's what everybody thinks Death should look like. I mean, I *could* wear that stuff, if I wanted to. And with proper safety precautions, I could have a scythe, too. But I think all of that's just a bit silly, if you want my opinion. To get the proper effect out of the hood it has to come way out here, (*Indicating with his hands out in front of his face.*) and then you lose all your peripheral vision. And it's hot in that garb. Frankly, it's a pain. I prefer casual business myself.

SILAS: This is... this is a lot to take in.

DEATH: And that's why I'm here. Think of me as one of those old guys who gets paid to say, "Hello," when you go into the store, except I'm not that old. (*Beat.*) Hello. Welcome to the Afterlife.

SILAS: That's it? That's all you do?

DEATH: Well... it's a bit more involved than that, but... yeah. Not really. In just a few minutes, more or less, a bus is going to come along. My job is to make sure you're on it. Once you're safely aboard, as they say, "My job here is done." It may sound a bit... lame, but it really is an important job. You see, the transition from being alive to dead can be a bit confusing. To say the least. If I weren't here, who knows how long you'd wander around in your old life, wondering why nobody is paying any attention to you anymore. And if they never paid any attention to you to begin with... yeah. That, and I'm here to keep you from running off.

SILAS: Running off?

DEATH: You know... (*Making his fingers look like two legs running away.*) ...running off. Doing a runner. Getting away.

SILAS: So... if I ran off, and you couldn't catch me...

DEATH: Couldn't catch you? I'm not even going to try. Go ahead. Run off. Be a ghost. I'm not chasing after you. Nobody is. Sooner or later, you'll come back. They always do. Understand, though, before you go getting all fleet-footed on me, if you miss that bus, it may be... awhile before it comes back.

SILAS: Awhile?

DEATH: Awhile. Years. I mean, really, it's never coming back for you. You miss that bus, and your only hope is to happen to be somewhere when the bus just happens to be there, too. Could be a day. Could be a week. Could be 227 years.

SILAS: 227 years?

DEATH: June 3, 1654 to August 16, 1881. That's the record so far. It was before my time. But that's a lot of time to be somewhere where nobody wants you. Seriously. Who's going to welcome you into their home once you're dead? We've all read "The Monkey's Paw." We know the story. Nobody's opening that door.

SILAS: So that's it. I'm dead.

DEATH: (*Holding his hands together piously.*) Passed on. Bereft of life. Ceased to be. Gone. Lost. No more. (*Beat.*) Or the euphemism of your choice.

SILAS: I... I'm dead.

DEATH: Oh, come on. No need to be all dramatic. It's not all that bad.

SILAS: Not all that bad!?

DEATH: Yeah. Think of all the things you'll never have to do again. You don't have to wash those dirty dishes. Or bathe. You don't have to mow the lawn. Go antiquing with your wife. And you'll never have to file taxes ever again... well, depending. Seriously, I don't know what you're complaining about.

SILAS: You don't know what I'm complaining about?! I'm dead! If I can't complain about being dead, what's the point in complaining at all?

DEATH: Exactly! Look, it's not like you really had any plans for the weekend, or the rest of your life, as far as that goes.

SILAS: That's because I hadn't planned on being dead!

DEATH: Like you weren't going to die... ever?

SILAS: Well...

DEATH: Oh, come on. It's not like anybody's going to miss you at their parties.

SILAS: You don't know that.

DEATH: I bet all you'd end up doing is eating microwaved entrees while watching reruns on HGTV.

SILAS: It's better than being dead.

DEATH: Like you would know.

SILAS: But... But this can't be all there is. I just feel like there should've been more to my life.

DEATH: Well, if it's any consolation, you do get a ribbon.

DEATH, with a flourish, hands Silas a small, silk participation ribbon.

SILAS: *(Reading.)* "Participation."

DEATH: You should be proud of that, you know. Not everybody can say that.

SILAS: That's it? Just a ribbon?

DEATH: And a juice box.

SILAS: What flavour?

DEATH: I don't know. You'll get it on the bus. I think it's something blue. *(Beat.)* Hey! Hope you said your goodbyes. Eternity's waiting. It's time for you to go... somewhere else.

SILAS: Somewhere else? Where?

DEATH: Oh... let's just say... there are options. But honestly, I don't know. That's another Division. I don't worry about them. They don't worry about me. But, hey! You'll find out soon enough.

SILAS: What's it like... ?

DEATH: What's what like?

SILAS: You know... being dead?

DEATH: How should I know? I'm not dead. You don't have to be dead to do this job. We're an Equal Opportunity Employer. Of course, if I were dead then I could do that creepy thing with my skeleton finger pointing out from under my robe. *(Demonstrates best he can, what without being a skeleton and not wearing a robe; in a deathly voice.)* "It's time." *(Beat; back to normal.)* I imagine that would be fun. But

then, it would probably be harder to socialize on your day off. I suppose there are always trade-offs.

SILAS: I don't understand.

DEATH: Most don't. This? This whole "Death" thing, it's just a part time job. It helps supplement my pay, and it puts some excitement in my life. During the day, I'm a middle school math teacher. Seventh grade math is just as dull as you remember. It's even worse being on the other side of the desk. *(Beat.)* With my gig here, I get in about twenty hours a week doing the Death thing. More if I wanted. I usually work a couple evenings during the week, and Saturdays. The pay's OK, but there's no benefits to speak of, unless you're full time. Now full time – there's a gig. Thing is, you really need to be dead to get full time. They don't come out and say that, but I don't know anybody who isn't dead that works full time.

SILAS: You choose to be Death?

DEATH: Well... yeah. *(Beat.)* I tried calling myself a Pre-Undertaker for a while. But it was just confusing. I had to explain it to everybody. So, really, what was the point? You know, when it gets down to it. Yeah. It's Death. It's not like I'm doing anything wrong or immoral. I'm just making a buck. And if I'm not doing it, somebody else will. Besides, it's a nice break from my day job. Here, people actually listen to me. I mean, you find out it's Death at your door, and I've got your attention.

SILAS: But... but I don't want to die.

DEATH: I thought we'd already covered that.

SILAS: But I don't.

DEATH: Well, then. I guess you don't have to go after all.

SILAS: Really?

DEATH: Of course you have to go. I was just kidding.

SILAS: Kidding?!

DEATH: Who says Death's not a joking matter?

SILAS: That's awful!

DEATH: What? Would you rather I be all glum? In the end, you're going to be just as dead, so why not have a few laughs while we're at it? OK... an undertaker walks into a bar...

SILAS: Are you trying to tell a joke?

DEATH: Oh. You've already heard the punchline. Never mind. I got more. Two nuns, a collie, and a circus elephant...

SILAS: Stop! You're torturing me!

DEATH: Oh. You heard that one, too. OK... I got one I know you haven't heard. It's one of my own. Ready? (*Beat.*) Death gets a job at a casino, dealing Black Jack. Actually, it could be anything, but I just chose Black Jack. So then this guy comes up and puts down his bet. And he says, "I'm feeling lucky tonight!" And Death says, "Wanna bet?" (*Beat.*) OK... maybe it would be funnier if it were a roulette wheel. And then I could give the guy a Russian accent! (*With accent.*) I feel luck tonight. (*Beat.*) Really. It's OK. You can laugh at Death.

SILAS: You want me to laugh about being dead?!

DEATH: Why not? A little comic relief. It's my way of making death just a little better.

SILAS: You're... you're horrible!

DEATH: So I guess asking you to give me a positive online review is out of the question?

SILAS: This is absolutely awful! You're absolutely awful.

DEATH: (*Sincere.*) I'm not really that bad of a guy. (*Beat.*) OK! I admit it. It's an awful job. Nobody's ever glad to see me. Nobody says, "C'mon in! Make yourself at home. Let me introduce you to my family." (*Beat.*) The screams are the worst. The weeping and the moaning. The begging and the pleading. The anguish and the regret. You have no idea. And what's the point? It's not going to change a thing. (*Beat.*) But it's got to be done. Can you imagine the chaos if nobody got on the bus? Ever? So I try to make the best of it. But, yeah. It's hard to stay upbeat when everybody you meet is dead.

SILAS: Seriously? You're complaining to me? I'm the one who's dead, and you're the one complaining.

DEATH: Well... yeah. Who doesn't complain about their job? Oh, I suppose you had some cushy job, like a banker.

SILAS: Not really. I guess my job was OK. Mostly. But it's not like I'd continue going in if they stopped paying me. Seriously. It was a job. It was work. They call it "work" for a reason.

DEATH: So what did you do?

SILAS: I was an accountant... (*Aside.*) sort of.

DEATH: So how was it?

SILAS: What?

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