

At Death's Doors

by Joe Gordon

Centre-stage is a simple waiting room with one door to each side. There is a desk that has two trays on it, one marked 'In' and one marked 'Out', a service bell, and vase full of dead flowers. HERMAN - an upstanding middleclass Brit - is sitting by the magazine table, holding a queue ticket and looking unsure of where he is. ANGEL - a camp receptionist - enters carrying some flowers. He takes the dead flowers of the vase and replaces them with the new flowers, which also happen to be dead.

ANGEL: Number 38? Right. This is purgatory, over there is heaven (*points to the main door*), and there's hell (*points to the stage door*).

HERMAN: What?

ANGEL: (*pointing*) Heaven, purgatory, hell.

HERMAN: What?

ANGEL: Oh, sorry, I forgot, and you're dead.

HERMAN: What?

ANGEL: Yeah, and some people think it's, like, a big practical joke, but it's not. Because you're actually dead.

HERMAN: What?

ANGEL: And you wouldn't believe the trouble we have trying to tell people that we're not actors and that this is our day-job, and they actually say, 'don't quit your day-job' and the only thing we can really say to that is, 'look, mate, you're dead, honest to God - which is actually part of the contract - and you better hope that I'm good at this job, or you'll be going to the wrong room.'

HERMAN: What?

ANGEL: That's FIVE whats! That's enough to power a little light inside your brain that goes 'ping' and says to you, 'you know, maybe I *am* dead and this

angel guy knows what he's talking about'.

HERMAN: But... I don't even believe in God!

ANGEL: I know... and that's why you have rather a lot of explaining to do!

HERMAN: But...

ANGEL: Are you stuck again? Look, no jokes, you're dead.

HERMAN: But...

ANGEL: Yeah, and don't worry, it was a happy death. Like fish. Yeah, you died like a free fish, so don't worry about it and enjoy the time you spend here.

HERMAN: But...

ANGEL: And-

HERMAN: No, wait, sorry I actually do have something to say.

ANGEL: Yes?

HERMAN: Yes. I don't get it - you said it's your job to make sure I don't enter the wrong room. But you just told me that there's heaven and there's hell?

ANGEL: Ah, but who says that I'm an angel apart from me? And who says that you're meant to go to heaven and who says you're meant to go to hell. That's what this little room's for, and that's my job, sort of. Though I don't actually have contractual responsibility anymore because we've downsized and now it's all self-service.

HERMAN: Self-service?

ANGEL: Yes. We used to do tests on you in here. We had an IQ test where we'd ask you lots of questions, like what's the square root of this, and what does this word mean, and what's the funny shape... and then real sneakily there'd be a question like, 'would you murder your mother if you were paid a million pounds'. It was randomly inserted into the test, so we thought people would just answer naturally. It was against the clock, you see. Tapping into their subconscious, spiritual forces. You'd be surprised how many people got caught out by that one. And we had fitness tests. But someone realised that someone's fitness might not be proportional to their morality, so we had to

scrap it. But it was one of the favourites, everyone thought it was fun. Except fat monks. Fat monks never liked it. They always complained that it was unfair on people who had devoted their lives to religion instead of exercising. But then, there's always an alternative to fatty foods, isn't there? That's what I thought. But the system needed to be changed. Anywho - as I said, self-service, ring this bell (*indicates*) if you need me, and have a whale of a time.

HERMAN: But aren't you supposed to be helping me?

ANGEL: You'd think so, wouldn't you?

HERMAN:... (*confused*) yes?

ANGEL: Yeah. Sorry, it's just the job gets a little repetitive sometimes. And a tad morbid.

HERMAN: Well can't you tell me more about my death?

ANGEL: Thing is, I never understood the system and I'm just stalling you.

HERMAN: What do you mean?

ANGEL: Well, (*approaches and settles*), if this was all eternal and immortal and ever-lasting, then how long before people stop clinging onto their mortal life? I mean even Jesus is still banging on about the bloody loaves and fishes, not to mention the cross, and he's up there, you know, networking. So when people ask me about their death, I don't know whether or not I want to tell them, because maybe they should just forget it and enjoy eternal happiness... or, you know, grin and bear eternal damnation. I haven't yet seen someone do that though - everyone, you'll see, always banging on about how they lived and how they died. But I don't know, and I shouldn't really be bashing the system because it's been very good to me. (*whispers*) And it let me off on a little, you know, dirty sin, that I've had to keep back from that one (*points to Hell*). You know (*makes a weird gesture*). I didn't know it was a sin. At the time, lots of things were sins, and it got confusing which ones were and which ones weren't. I was - See what I was saying? Always

harking back to the mortal life. Try not to do it. I mean, actually, try not do it. You'll realise how impossible it is. Makes you think, doesn't it. And there's plenty of time for thinking here (*pause*). See, you just had a few seconds of that. Extend that to infinity. But you never get to infinity, do you? Got a lot of time to ponder things like that. (*slaps HERMAN on the shoulder*) But don't worry, I'm not having you on. You're actually dead. Kind of reassuring, in a way? Isn't it? Like going to sleep after a hard day at work? (*HERMAN looks mildly terrified*) No? Oh well, can't please everybody. Ring if you need me (*Exits through front of stage or side door.*)

HERMAN is left by himself. Steps around, inspecting pot plants and the like.

HERMAN: (*Tries the Heaven door. It doesn't open so goes to the Hell door. It opens and he enters. Lights turn to Hell. The DEVIL appears, seeming like a receptionist.*). Hello, is this hell?

DEVIL: (*laughs*) Bet you've never said that before.

HERMAN: So, it is?

DEVIL: Yeh. Well, hell proper is just behind me. You're not allowed to see it until you, you know, know which way you're going.

HERMAN: And you're some kind of receptionist?

DEVIL: (*sighs*) Buddy, what does it say on my nametag.

HERMAN: Sorry, I haven't got my glasses on. (*Approaches*) Devil, in brackets
The.

DEVIL: Is that a shock?

HERMAN: What?

DEVIL: I mean, look at me, I'm just a normal kind of girl, aren't I? No wah! No ooo! No horns! No red! No blood! Bet I get a bad press back on earth. Make me look fat and grotesque, and that's just the start of the lies. I fought back but all I could get was for God's name to be used as swear words.

HERMAN: Well-

DEVIL: *Christ!*

HERMAN: -none of this really seems-

DEVIL: *In the throes of passion?*

HERMAN: (*Confused*) -how I expected it. I thought angels have wings and-

DEVIL: Yes, they do. It's just not fashionable to show them anymore. When birds on earth got the same idea it was disastrous. They all fell out of the sky. Guess who cleared that one up? You ever had moments where things, fundamental things, haven't made sense? Or were suddenly different from how you used to truly believe? Everything just seems odd? Like your whole life's just been one stupid game of Blind Man's Bluff?

HERMAN: Yeah, yeah I suppose so. Quite frequently too.

DEVIL: And you're being poked and tickled from all sides, manipulated in a metaphysical manner? Nothing makes sense... Yeah, no, sorry, that wasn't anything to do with *our* power, I just always think that's pretty cool.

HERMAN: I see. So, how do you have power over the things on earth?

DEVIL: I *do*.

HERMAN: How did you teach birds to fly again?

DEVIL: Zaps. No, not really. That was a lie.

HERMAN: What?

DEVIL: I made it up. You've got to do something, Hell gets as boring as hell.

(Sincerely) Laugh. Laugh, now.

HERMAN: No.

DEVIL: Or you won't be able to join my club.

HERMAN: I don't want to join your club.

DEVIL: What a spoilsport. But here's the real comedy - technically I have a greater claim over you than Old White-Beard over there, seeing as you didn't believe in God, did you?

HERMAN: I didn't believe in you, either!

DEVIL: Ah, but did you ever say it?

HERMAN: Well... I can't remember saying it, no. I thought the two came hand in hand!

DEVIL: I don't need him. He'd be nothing without me.

HERMAN: Exactly.

DEVIL: No, not exactly. Not exactly. Because I'd do fine without him. I'm a one-woman show. I can play one of those one-man-band things, you know.

HERMAN: Can you?

DEVIL: No. But I'm playing with your mind!

HERMAN: No, you're not.

DEVIL: Give me time, give me time. Anyway, I think it's a little mean. Saying that I couldn't exist if he didn't exist. I could have won the war.

HERMAN: Yes, but you evidently didn't.

DEVIL: Maybe I did. Maybe the guy in there is just one of hell's angels.

HERMAN: Is he?

DEVIL: Is who? Me? Who's me? Whosimee! (*makes a face*) Blah! (*Composes herself*). Yes, I could have won. Evil was always stronger because we have many more sharp edges.

HERMAN: Is that a fact?

DEVIL: No. I lied again. Join my club. Go on. I would say that it's heavenly but...

HERMAN: You're not a very good salesman, are you?

DEVIL: Aren't I? You tell me.

HERMAN: I just did.

DEVIL: No you didn't, you asked me a question. I gave no answer. Nobody won. Join my club.

HERMAN: It seems like you're an abysmal salesperson.

DEVIL: You could say diabolical. But don't. It's not true. Am I? If you buy into this thing, then surely I'll be a good salesperson.

HERMAN: Yes.

DEVIL: (*Sighs*) No, I'm terrible. He's getting everybody these days. I try so hard but he always wins.

HERMAN: There, perhaps a sentence of sense. Wait, why am I educating the devil?

DEVIL: Because you love me. Don't deny it. And now you're sympathetic of my poor, poor hell, and you want to join it and me. Yes?

HERMAN: No.

DEVIL: I have a confession.

HERMAN: For your sins? Couldn't that take some time?

DEVIL: No, for one lie. I'm not actually the devil.

HERMAN: But it says so on your nametag! Devil, in brackets The.

DEVIL: I printed it off. It's a lie. I'm a fraud.

HERMAN: Who's the devil?

DEVIL: (*leans in and whispers*) Jesus.

HERMAN: *Jesus? Jesus* is the devil?

DEVIL: Ha! That's a sin! You blasphemed! You must join my club!

HERMAN: What, so you are the devil?

DEVIL: What's it to you?

HERMAN: (*loudly*) I just died! This is when I'm meant to find out everything!

DEVIL: Nobody ever promised you that. Did God promise you that?

HERMAN: I don't know, I haven't seen him yet.

DEVIL: You came to me first? I already have you under my spell?

HERMAN: No, it was just I couldn't open the door.

DEVIL: I know. I chewing gummed up the lock.

HERMAN: Wait, are you actually the devil? Brackets and all?

DEVIL: No. The real devil's the other one, not Jesus - Peter. Him - fom the Bible. Peter. You know, Peter Pan! Peter Pan! *Hook!*

HERMAN: I don't understand you.

DEVIL: And yet you said I couldn't play with your mind! Ha! (*cries*) Next! This one's smitten!

HERMAN: No, there's a difference between saying stuff that doesn't make sense, and making me think that my thoughts don't make sense.

DEVIL: Look, let's be honest with each other. Man to man, in brackets woman, in brackets 'Devil', close brackets, square brackets 'The'. Cheese doesn't fly.

HERMAN: What do you mean?

DEVIL: I jelly fish mean liquefy you.

HERMAN: Are you just spouting random words?

DEVIL: Ha! Random words. The unpredictable. The ambushers. Unexplained. Unasked for. The quirky bursts. The non-sequitur.

HERMAN: Yes, all that stuff.

DEVIL: Er, yeah. Did it work?

HERMAN: What were you trying to do?

DEVIL: Mess with ya.

HERMAN: Then no, it didn't work.

DEVIL: I am Spartacus.

HERMAN: Are you?

DEVIL: (*Laughs heavily*) You're an idiot. I'm the devil.

HERMAN: Are you though?

DEVIL: No.

HERMAN: That's it, I'm off to find God. Because quite frankly you're nonsensical and a nuisance. (*makes for Heaven door*)

DEVIL: That's not club-talk. You'll never be in the hell club if you talk like that. Or maybe you will. Or maybe you'll never know. Or maybe-

HERMAN: Shut up, or talk to yourself, but I'm going to see God.

DEVIL: As I said, don't expect anything. There's no reason to. First, have a bite of my apple.

HERMAN: What?

DEVIL: My apple (*picks from desk*). Eat it? For me?

HERMAN: No. I read the bible. Parts of it.

DEVIL: Dramatisation, the whole thing. And it reads terribly. You should have seen my review. Isn't there some original sin somewhere inside you?

HERMAN: Not any that I like to throw around.

DEVIL: (*Just thinking of the idea*) Throw the apple at me!

HERMAN: No!

DEVIL: Go on! Throw it at me! Destroy the devil with an apple! You'll be like that guy with the slingshot and the pebble!

HERMAN: David?

DEVIL: (*gasp*) That's his name!

HERMAN: Who?

DEVIL: The real devil!

HERMAN: (*Stares in confusion, DEVIL sits down with the audience in a huff.*)

Herman pick up apple and considers it as walks to Purgatory desk. He goes to take a bite of it and then suddenly, after an overhead 'bing-bong'.

GOD: This is God. Come forth! God beckons you! The chewing gum has been removed! By angels! (*HERMAN walks to light of GOD*).

HERMAN: Is that really God?

GOD: No, it's the cat's mother! Of course it's God!

HERMAN: Where are you? (*Looking around*)

GOD: Well it sounds like I'm *omnipresent*... but that's just... bad acoustics.

HERMAN: Um, well, - hello?

GOD: What, just 'hello'? You didn't have any special welcome ready just for God, your own creator? Never mind, I shall try to forget that and not let it effect my final decision.

HERMAN: Your final decision?

GOD: Yes. Whether or not you can come into my club.

HERMAN: So that's for you to decide? It seemed, over at hell, that it was pretty much a free-for-all.

GOD: Haven't you realised that the devil is a lot more allowing? I think she's still operating the standard contract though - an eternity, no more, no less, and no holiday leave. Like here. There are opportunities for promotion in both areas.

HERMAN: To angel?

GOD: Well, yes, but mostly just managers, team leaders, you know.

HERMAN: *Team leaders?*

GOD: Yes, but anyway, let me get this clear, you didn't believe in me?

HERMAN: No.

GOD: Well, do you believe in me now?

HERMAN: I'm not sure what I believe in at the moment.

GOD: Well when God stares you in the face, young man, you'd be pretty wise to start to bloody believe in him, wouldn't you think?

HERMAN: I really couldn't say. This is all too... over my head.

GOD: Yes, well. We try to condescend but obviously we can't reach everyone.

HERMAN: OK. One thing is, perhaps you're too harsh to be God.

GOD: Wait, you're telling God how to be God? You're walking on ice my friend, you're walking on very thin ice.

HERMAN: Well, I'm only saying.

GOD: I've heard everything that you've said. I've definitely heard everything that you've said about me. Not very pleasant things. Not things I'd like to tell my mother. Not that I have a mother. Impressive, isn't it?

HERMAN: What? That you don't have a mother?

GOD: Yes.

HERMAN: Not really. I mean, surely you have more impressive facets.

GOD: I can make stuff go exceedingly fast.

HERMAN: Yeah, like that.

GOD: And that song, 'What if God was one of us'. That was written about me.

HERMAN: If you are who you say-

GOD: So, I see you chose to visit my friend, The Devil, before me.

HERMAN: It was because of the chewing gum.

GOD: Yes. Yes, a fine excuse. *(coughs)* Unbeliever. So, here you are, and now, are you Christian?

HERMAN: No.

GOD: No, you're meant to think about it and repent and take belief. This is the last chance, kind of thing. That's what I'm getting at.

HERMAN: Oh. Well, what God are you?

GOD: Yes, I would love to say 'the' God but... well, we can't have everything. I'm the Christian God. Any denomination really, just ignore that piffle.

HERMAN: Christian? But why?

GOD: You were in the Christian catchment area.

HERMAN: *Catchment area?* If I don't believe in God, how come I came here?

GOD: Oh, I see your logic! If you don't believe in something, it can't exist! Spectacular. I must learn from you one day. Do you, earthling, have any idea how complicated aiding the transmigration of souls over entirely different dimensions actually is? It's not a perfect world. Thank the girl.

HERMAN: But-

GOD: *(worried, accusing)* You're looking at me.

HERMAN: Yes but...

GOD: You're looking at me, thinking about what I look like.

HERMAN: No I'm not.

GOD: Yes, you are. You are. You're thinking that I look tiny and puny and less than what a God should look like.

HERMAN: You're starting to sound like the other one.

GOD: The old devil?

HERMAN: Well, that's who she said she was, half the time.

GOD: Well she does have a nametag, I think a little courtesy might be in order. From slightly inferior people. If you get my drift. Young one. Immature. Scaredy-Cat...

HERMAN: She just talked nonsense.

GOD: Don't think you can come in here and grass on The Devil and hope I lightning bolt her. One thing, I can't - well, I say that I could but let's be honest to ourselves - and secondly, she's a good friend.

HERMAN: You're friends?

GOD: Of course. Hadn't you noticed that we share office space?

HERMAN: But, why?

GOD: Do you know how long we've been on the job? We have different views, certainly, yet I respect her for her views. We rarely see each other. Always ends in a flaming row. But I hear she's really an alright gal..

HERMAN: What's so good about heaven?

GOD: The sex.

HERMAN: Sex?

GOD: Yes. You wouldn't have thought, would you?

HERMAN: Sex with who?

GOD: Oh, you found me out, there's no sex in there. It's all just loveliness. And glitter. Yes, just pure bliss. Sorry! Idiot.

HERMAN: The thing is -

GOD: *(annoyingly)* Sorry! Sorry! Can't we get on with this? We have souls to fight over.

HERMAN: If heaven is anything like this, I want back into mortality.

GOD: Ungrateful human.

HERMAN: Do you actually fight over souls?

GOD: Not really, we just sort of flirt. Slap each other, pinch, pull each other's trousers down.

HERMAN: I thought you never see each other?

GOD: We close our eyes. It's great.

HERMAN: You're both as mad as each other!

GOD: Try telling the courts that!

HERMAN: What courts? Purgatory? It's a useless room!

GOD: Yes, new system see. We used to use *bananas*.

HERMAN: Bananas? For what?

GOD: To tell how good people were. This was when the rich were good and the poor were bad. It's all higgledy-piggledy now, isn't it? Yes, bananas. You see, rich people get the big bananas. That's why the Western world thinks that the average banana is this big and the native banana growers get teensy bananas, not big enough to feed their children. Who are as big as chickens. That's why The Queen has a banana as big as a horse.

HERMAN: As big as a horse?

GOD: Bigger.

HERMAN: This is absolute shit.

GOD: Yet, in a way, it's frighteningly true?

HERMAN: No.

GOD: Damn, that's what I was going for. All that practice! Think of a number.

HERMAN: OK.

GOD: Got it? 42!

HERMAN: No.

GOD: Fiddlesticks. *(Pause)* Do not take me for a conjuror of cheap tricks! *(desk light turns unimpressively on and off repeatedly, then awkward pause)*. So, have you decided which club you'd prefer?

HERMAN: Heaven or hell?

GOD: Yes.

HERMAN: At the moment, I must say purgatory seems the most peaceful.

GOD: But the cleaner will chuck you out on Wednesdays.

HERMAN: Do you still have days up here?

GOD: Up?? Up? How typical. Ask me a question. Any question. Come on, I'm God.

HERMAN: O.K. What's the meaning of life?

GOD: Easy. The state or quality that identifies living beings, characterised chiefly by growth, reproduction, and response to stimuli... I use the Collins definition.

HERMAN: That's average.

GOD: You're average. I'm super-human!!

HERMAN: You're just as bad as her.

GOD: *That* one? I'm like the anti-bad of her!

HERMAN: You're not. You're just really, really frustrating, like her.

GOD: But... didn't you want all your questions answered?

HERMAN: Well, if I'm here, I thought I might as well enquire. But you haven't helped at all.

GOD: Because everybody thinks their questions will be answered! And *you*, you already thought you knew the answers! Well, I'm not telling. Is everyone still trying to immortalise themselves down there?

HERMAN: I thought you knew everything?

GOD: I'm acting dumb. Remember what I said about thin ice. I know they're all trying to immortalise themselves. In art and plays -books! Ha! Immortalised in books! As if the books are invincible! You ever stopped to think how many books stroll in here, wanting to be Gods? Saying that humans promised them? You know how hard it is to tell them they shouldn't even be here? To their little pretty faces!

HERMAN: Now I just think you're talking rubbish.

GOD: What were you expecting? I thought you were expecting just nothing, an end (*pause*), death. And you got something else - you got wham! Zing! I thought I gave Zing! (*sad*) I thought I gave Zing.

HERMAN: I'm just very confused. And I feel somehow more intelligent than God.

GOD: What, intelligence can't be silly? Jokes aren't useful? You never saw Einstein splat a custard pie into Nietzsche's moustache?

HERMAN: But you're not even joking!

GOD: And you're not even living! One-all. No, seriously, here's the thing... here's the thing... here's the thing...

HERMAN: ... where's the thing?

GOD: The thing is, you can come into my club.

HERMAN: Really?

GOD: Yeah. Yeah, you won. You impressed me. Did I hide it well?

HERMAN: To be honest, I thought you were a bit of a nob.

GOD: You got me! Go right in.

HERMAN: What, to heaven?

GOD: Sure! First drink's on me. Drink from the tap labelled 'bliss'.

HERMAN: O...K... and you're sure that this is heaven.

GOD: I don't know... I've never checked... that's a good point. Hmm. I guess I've always just assumed.

HERMAN: It's heaven in there?

GOD: Probably.

HERMAN: Not hell?

GOD: No. You've got ten seconds to decide. Tick tick tick.

HERMAN: Why are you giving me ten seconds to decide?

GOD: Suspense? Entertainment? I get very easily bored, you know. Seen it all. 6 seconds.

HERMAN: If I go in, can I come out?

GOD: 4 seconds. Yes.

HERMAN: When?

GOD: In an eternity. 2 seconds.

HERMAN: I'm going in but I'm very sceptical.

GOD: Don't you ever learn, unbeliever? (*HERMAN opens door*).

Hmmm.

HERMAN looks through door and stands bemused.

HERMAN: It's just a toilet. And... (*DEVIL gets up and looks into toilet with him.*)

DEVIL: Joke's on you! (*laughs*)

GOD: (*DEVIL takes a photo that creates paparazzi flash*) Bosh!

HERMAN: What?!

DEVIL: I said, joke's on you!

HERMAN: Why, I must know, is the joke on me?

GOD: Maybe because... your name's Herman!

DEVIL: Herman! Like a girl man!

HERMAN: Can I go now?

DEVIL: Where to?... Hell?! (*Both are in hysterics*)

GOD: You're such a penis!

DEVIL: Such a penis!

HERMAN: Why? What have I done to deserve this?

DEVIL: I don't know... sins!

GOD: Acts of kindness!

DEVIL: Penis, good one!

GOD: And you died! They always do that! Why don't we make you more reliable? Penis!

HERMAN: But what the hell's going on?

DEVIL: Let's just call it a near-death experience between friends.

HERMAN: So... I'm going back to earth?

DEVIL: Yes, yes you are.

GOD: (*Cracking up*) Yeah, sure!

HERMAN: Oh my-

GOD: Bet you expected something better than this!

HERMAN: Look, can I go back now or where do I go?

GOD: (*Seriously*) Well... well, I really don't know. Devil, in brackets The, where do... where do penises go to die?

DEVIL: Good one, good one.

HERMAN: (*Walking to desk*) I'm not having this.

GOD: Yeah, (*sarcastic*) good one!

(*Herman rings bell in Purgatory and waits a few seconds*)

DEVIL: Herman!!

HERMAN presses bell and 'What if God was One of us?' starts playing.

DEVIL: (*HERMAN wanders towards entrance door*) I thought that was quite a good show.

GOD: Yeah, something a bit different. We've got to ask for a raise. We're under appreciated.

DEVIL: But there's nobody to give us a raise!!

GOD: Scrap the raise. Life is good. See you next death. Next time I'll look like Dick Van Dyke and we'll both be naked but for a tie.

DEVIL: One to share!

GOD: And horses!

DEVIL: And they can fall down a chimney and it'll be great!

(*Song kicks in as HERMAN leaves theatre.*)